

HEMA'S SMILE

by

Nadia S. Choudhury

HEMA'S SMILE

a novel

by

Nadia S. Choudhury

A thesis presented for the B.A. degree

with honors in

The Department of English

University of Michigan

Spring 2011

Readers: Keith Taylor and V.V. Ganeshanathan

Dedicated to
my parents, without whom
I would have
no fire to write with.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I could not have written this novel without the help of my professors and my friends. Specifically, it is my creative writing professors who have motivated, pushed, and helped me. Michael Byers, Tish O'Dowd, Peter Ho Davies, Khaled Mattawa, Cody Walker, A. Van Jordan—each has left some groove in my writing.

Simultaneously, without my friend Jennifer Jacobi and her voice of reason and objectivity, much of this story may not have been edited or added to. She has been with the novel from its first word. She has seen each word evolve. Without her, Hema would have been left standing at some subway stop in New York City, only to never have run across David.

All I can say: Thank you.

ABSTRACT

This is Hema's story. And it's about the dual nature of American existence as a first-generation daughter. Choosing between her parents' happiness and her own desires. Bengali culture and American society. She learns to toe the line between two worlds as she paves her own way through New York City's streets.

Birthed me
in an alcohol-free wine bottle.
Cries and fingerprints on glass—
can you see why I'm so
entirely unhappy?
Took so much care to make me,
time
to take me.
I'm going to shatter this
entire fucking world.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

CHAPTER TWO

CHAPTER THREE

CHAPTER FOUR

CHAPTER FIVE

I

At the age of seven, Hema has unnaturally straight, smooth, mahogany-colored hair. Bangladeshi women in South Jersey coo over its texture and coloring. She *is*, after all, dark-skinned. Girls like her aren't fortunate in this way very often.

Bangladeshis value, above all else, dark (as close to black as genetically possible), straight hair. But, this is a special circumstance. These particular women, living in South Jersey, dye their hair every six weeks at the salon. Their shades of hair color range from a reddish brown to a honey brown. They strive to be modern, moneyed, *Westernized*, Bangladeshi women.

Of course, simultaneously, they're mortified by the idea of being caught wearing jeans and sweaters by any other Bangladeshis. They've got to preserve their ethnicity. Or rather, seem like they're preserving their ethnicity.

This is the world our protagonist lives in.

Hema lies on the couch. Stares at the blank television's screen.

There's never anything to do in this house.

She sits upside down on the sofa, her neck hanging off the seat. Feet propped against the back of the chair, almost reaching the wall it stands against. Twenty minutes of this and her head begins to feel like it's going to explode. The blood pumps strong there. Hema thinks of what Chitra would do if she walked into the living room to find her

head had exploded and stained the walls and furniture. Chitra would scrub the entire room, ridding it of all the gore. Maybe she'd even cry a little. Sob. No...Maybe she'd be *hysterical*. Though, a little stain would just *have* to remain on the television screen. And it would just *refuse* to come off. That way, she would always remain in the room. That is, until Chitra decided to get rid of the television and get a new one.

Hema sits upright and sighs.

Nothing ever happens how she wants it to.

She stands up and goes to the television screen. Crouches down to look at her reflection in its dark window. Bleck. It's skewed.

She walks down the hallway into her parents' bedroom and opens its door. White everywhere. Chitra's explained to her it's easier to spot dirt and keep the place clean this way. She looks into the body-length mirror to her left. Bleck (she imagines scrunching her face in disgust...as if she just ate cauliflower and cabbage). Long limbs. She hunches over, curls her hands in and waddles over to the mirror. No, she wouldn't be a good gorilla. She can't make herself make the noises, though she's shaped her mouth into an "O."

She takes her mother's black scarf that's hanging off the mirror's edge. The mirror tilts up as her arm hits it. She doesn't bring it back to its proper position. Wraps the scarf around and around her neck. Her head looks detached from the rest of her body; her neck engulfed by the chiffon scarf. She tilts her chin up and looks down her nose into the mirror's reflection. All she can see's the bottom of her chin and the stretch of her neck. She looks *big...like...tall*.

Hema tilts her chin down. Straightens the mirror. Remembers she's a girl. She *could* be pretty. If she tried.

She leans in real close to the mirror. So close she can see the creases in her lips. She wishes Chitra would let her wear red lipstick.

Hema sighs heavily.

She turns away from the mirror. Looks to the closet door. Has an idea. Scampers over to the door. Sees herself tiptoe across the carpet in her mind's eyes. Looks down at her black socks and black pants. Looks down her right arm, black sleeves. Right, she's dressed all in black. Throws open the door, with that dramatic flair all her own. Breathes in deep. The air smells different. One more deep breath. She's sucked in the energy necessary for the task. Walks in. Looks along the shelf lining the top of the right side of the closet. Slow pace. Taking everything in. Then, she sees it.

Her father's gray, wool fedora.

She jumps up and tries to grab. Jumps up, again. Tries, again.

Ok, one more time.

One. More. Jump.

She isn't able to grab the hat off the shelf.

She walks back into the bedroom. Goes to the writing desk. Grabs its chair. Drags it into the closet. Steps on. And finally, she's got the fedora in hand.

Hema breathes in deeply, one more time. Then she grins.

Leaving the chair in the closet, she walks to the mirror. Places the hat gently around her hair. Tilts it like her father. The scarf's still detaching her head from her shoulders. No-necked woman. She grins at her reflection.

She walks over to her mother's dressing table. Chitra will be angry with her. Nonetheless, she takes the red lipstick. The one in the gold tube. Takes off the top. Rolls it out of the tube. So red. Oh my. She brings it to her mouth. Then looks into the dressing table mirror. Chitra will be *so* angry. But it'll look *so* nice. She brings it closer to her mouth.

She hears a door shut. Chitra must have gone to the bathroom.

She rolls the lipstick back into its tube. Clicks its cover shut. Places it back in its place on the table.

Tomorrow. Maybe.

Hema's lying on the sofa, again, in the living room. From there, she can see Chitra walking back and forth between kitchen and dining room. She's preparing for dinner. Baba will be home soon. Chitra's tucked her achal in at the waist. Hema dangles her foot over the edge of the seat cushion. She pokes at her belly, lying on the sofa, feeling its pudginess. She lifts her shirt. Looks at her brown stomach. She slaps it. Imagines a ripple run through it. She does it again. Nope. No ripple. There's not enough pudge for that.

She throws her arm away. It dangles over the sofa's edge. She runs her index finger over its microfiber. Maroon color must be plush. The sofa's dust begins to line the inside of her nail. She doesn't look at it; the nail may be turning red from the fibers.

So. Boring.

Hema lets out a scream. Shrii. She likes the sound of it. Just. Perfect.

She waits for Chitra to rush over.

Chitra does. "What happened?"

"Nothing." Hema looks away from her mother. That little bit of drama, she thinks, dripping off her voice, like a soap opera star.

"What do you mean 'nothing'?" Chitra's holding a glass jug in her hand. It's dripping water droplets on to the carpet. Hema doesn't say anything. She sneaks a look at Chitra still standing there. She's frowning. Hema imagines herself grimacing. But she doesn't. Chitra interrupts her, "Hema! You are too much, sometimes." She turns around, ready to go back to the kitchen.

"Ma," Hema whines. "I'm bored. Don't you understand?"

"Go read a book."

"I've read all my books."

"Watch television."

"We don't have *cable*."

She shifts the jug from her right hand to her left. Hema sits up. "Watch a movie."

"I've watched all my videos."

Chitra looks at Hema. She imagines this to be Chitra's wit's end. She smiles small. Chitra shakes her head. "Ma, are you tired?" Chitra's hair's messy, coming out of

its bun. And, also, her skin doesn't look like she's *glowing*. Baba doesn't like it when she looks like this; Hema knows.

"You talk too much."

"What? I didn't even say anything!"

Chitra purses her lips. "Wait." She rushes to the kitchen. Then returns, jug no longer in hand. She disappears into her bedroom. Then returns, a video cassette in hand. "Here, take this. Watch it." She turns to go to the kitchen. Then adds, "And please, let me finish getting dinner ready. Your father will be home soon."

"Ok, ok." Hema's looking down at the cover of the tape. *Bringing up Baby*. Hmm... This is one of those *adult* movies that her parents always tell her she isn't old enough to watch. Of course, she *is* old enough. Teacher says her reading comprehension and vocabulary are at a fifth grader's level. And also, she knows all the multiplication table. *And*, to top it off, she can do divide better than anybody else in her class. Hema's parents simply don't understand she's mature enough for adult films.

Of course, it must've just occurred to Chitra that she *is* old enough. Otherwise, she wouldn't have given her the video.

Hema stands up. Makes sure Chitra can't see her. Then, she does a quick little dance. Jumps in the air. It's official, she's an adult. She runs to her mother's dressing table. Quickly pushes out the red lipstick from its gold tube. Checks the doorway. Chitra isn't there. She presses it against her lip, like she sees Chitra do so often. Runs it across her lip. Presses down hard. The red has to show up. She's, after all, a bit dark. The lipstick crumbles from the pressure. Doesn't matter. Her lips are red. She pushes the

cover back on before the stick's made it all the way back into the tube. Then rushes back to the living room.

She forgot to check what the lipstick looks like on her.

Hema puts the video in the VCR.

Hema's lying on the sofa, feet propped on its arm. She hears Amal's key enter the front door's key hole. The turn of the lock. Baba's home. She doesn't move, though she's itching to run and show him the lipstick. Chitra hasn't seen her since she's applied the lipstick to her mouth. Both will be surprised.

Hema sits upright. Her back's straight, shoulders pushed back. Her chin's in the air. She'll look like a woman, damn it, if nothing else.

She hears Chitra's sandals clack against the wooden hallway floor, leading to the front door. Chitra says, "You are here? Dinner's almost ready. Go wash up."

Hema can see, in her mind's eye, Amal hand Chitra his wool coat. Chitra hangs it up in the hallway closet. She's still imagining when Amal walks into the living room, ready to walk across and towards the bedroom. He stops at Hema's positioning on the sofa. "Hema, what is this?"

"Good evening, Baba. I think you should know, I'm a woman now." She holds back a smile. Chin in air. Back straight. She's very proper.

Amal furrows his eyebrows. "Really?" He begins to smile. Then frowns.

"Yes, of course." Hema's hands are on her hips. Her chin in the air. She looks down her nose. Her eyes are slits, as if she's analyzing the weight of her previous statement. But really, she's just waiting for Amal's reaction.

Chitra walks into the room. Before she's seen, she's heard, "Go wash up. The food will get—" she cuts herself off. Sees Hema's lipstick. Her voice's controlled, "Hema, is that my lipstick?"

Hema nods her head, "Yes, Ma. I had to use yours, seeing as how you won't buy me my own."

An edge enters into Chitra's voice, "Go wash it off. Now." She walks towards Hema. Amal steps in between the two women.

Amal chuckles. Then says, "Hema, girls your age do not wear makeup. Now, go do as your mother says."

"But, Baba, you don't understand," Hema pleads. "Ma let me watch *Bringing Up Baby*. That's one of those movies only adults watch. Right?" She stops for reassurance. Gets none. "And," she pauses, collecting her argument pieces, "an adult girl's a *woman*. And Baba, *women* wear red lipstick."

Amal looks to Chitra, "You let her watch one of our movies."

Chitra speaks only to him. "There is nothing bad in that one. She was driving me crazy all day."

Amal looks down at Hema. "Hema, you cannot watch anymore movies if you are going to behave this way. Do as your mother says, go wash it off."

“Fine!” Hema stands up. Stomps her little right foot. “This is so unfair!” She stomps her way to the end of the room. Turns around, the doorway framing her body. “By the way, I’ve decided I absolutely adore the name David.” She tosses her chin like she imagines Katherine Hepburn to do when she’s irritated. Turns and walks to the bathroom.

She hears Amal sigh behind her.

In the bathroom, Hema looks at her face in the mirror. The lipstick’s a bit...outside her mouth lines. But it isn’t bad. The color makes her look...fierce. Almost vicious. She pushes herself against the sink, looking closer at the reflection. She smiles. She smiles harder, showing her teeth. It doesn’t suit her. She looks better with her lips together. With teeth showing, she looks too nice. Not glamorous at all.

Amal knocks on the door. “Hurry up. I have to wash.”

Hema sighs. “Ok. Ok. One minute. I’m using the bathroom!” Of course she’s using the bathroom. That’s why she’s in there. She rips off seventeen sheets of paper, all intact. Crumples them up. Rubs the lump of paper across her mouth, smearing it with red. Looks at the reflection. A little bit of the red’s smeared on to her chin. Lips are tainted pink, now. She throws away the chain of paper. Unrolls more. Does the same again. As her lips change into their usual shade, they begin to look more and more...soft.

Vulnerable. She doesn't feel so womanly anymore. Hema throws the paper in the trash almost-violently. She looks at the reflection, again. Grimaces this time.

She takes a deep breath in. Swings open the door. There's Amal standing, waiting for her. "Everything all right, Hema?" His arms are crossed, his back against the wall. Amal looks, to her, just now, like he does in his old pictures. The pictures he has of himself before he married Chitra. In them, he has a beard, a mustache. Pierced ears. Bell bottom jeans. And, always, a cigarette hanging out from the corner of his mouth.

"Baba, how old are you?" Hema looks up at him, seriousness etched across each of her features.

"Why?"

She shrugs her shoulders. "I was just wondering."

"Thirty-seven."

"When did you get married?"

"Twenty-seven."

She purses her lips, in thought. "When did you stop having a beard?"

"Right before I got married." He uncrosses his arms and stands straight. "Why?"

She shrugs her shoulders. "Just wondering." Hema walks back into the living room. Plops herself in front of the television. The screen's black. She hears the bathroom door click shut.

At the dining table, Chitra spoons rice on to Amal and Hema's plates before she takes any for herself. Hema picks at the Basmati grains, separating each one. Chitra snaps, "Hema, start eating."

"Ma, there's nothing on my plate. Just rice." Hema continues separating the grains, creating a flat plain of rice on her plate. Chitra spoons the spinach-and-lentils onto her plate. Hema crinkles her nose. "Eww."

Chitra glares at her.

"Ma, I don't *like* spinach."

"Then eat chicken. There is curry." Chitra doesn't look at Hema.

"I don't like chicken!" Hema continues separating the rice grains.

Amal cuts in, eyeing Chitra's plate. "Women eat all sorts of vegetables. They do not complain."

Hema opens her mouth to complain. Then decides against it. She fingers, instead, the spinach on her plate. She separates the lentils from the spinach. Chitra eyes her. Hema looks up at her. Smiles. Then continues to pick at her food, taking bites occasionally.

Chitra finally says, "Hema, your skin will be horrible when you are older if you do not eat vegetables like spinach. Spinach is good for your skin."

Oh. Hema needs to have good skin. She eats, begrudgingly. Swallowing without chewing her food properly.

"So, Hema, what did you think of the movie?" Amal asks, leaning back in his chair.

Hema's bitten into a whole chili. Chitra puts them into the dishes, to give them flavor. You aren't supposed to *eat* them. Hema sucks in her cheeks. Eyes bulge. Wants to bite her tongue off. Reaches for water.

"What? Did you eat a chili?" Chitra asks, frowning. "I told you to watch out for them." She drinks a sip of her water. Holds the glass in her hand. Says quietly, "Actually, it is good for you. You will grow some from the heat."

Hema finishes her glass of water. Stares down at her plate. Her cheeks flush.

Amal asks again, "What did you think of the movie?" He chuckles.

Her eyes light up. Opening her mouth to talk, she grimaces. She purses her lips. Then says, "I liked it."

Chitra adds in, "Do not forget, Hema, a movie is just a movie. Not real life."

Hema looks between mother and father. Neither has spoken to the other during the entire meal.

Hema sits in front of the television. Feet, again, dangling off the sofa's arm. She's lifted her shirt up. Tapping on her belly. Waiting to see if a wave will ripple across her skin.

Nope.

She's not that fat.

That's good.

No stretch marks either.

Chitra applies cocoa butter to her skin every day to avoid them.

She hears her parents' bedroom door click shut. They only shut the door when they're having a serious conversation. She sits up, slowly, making sure not to make any noise on the microfiber cushion. Stands up slowly, hoping none of her joints creak—they don't. Tip toes across the floor and sits down near the bedroom door. Leans close to it. Her right ear hovers next to the crack between door and frame.

Hema hears Amal, "What is your problem, Chitra?"

"I do not have a problem. All I am asking is for you to set a better example for her."

"What? What am I doing wrong?"

"Go to the masjid once in a while. Pray. Do not encourage her watching these American movies all the time...and...and stop spoiling the girl! You baby her so much..."

"I encourage her to watch movies?"

"They are your movies. She wants to watch them because you watch them."

"You let her watch them!" Amal's voice gets louder. Closer. Hema scrambles up. Runs into the bathroom. Shuts the door. Presses her back against the door. Her chest heaves up. Then down. She presses her eyes shut. Spies must feel like this when they're on the verge of being discovered, but then escape. In the nick of time. Hema smiles to herself.

The first time Hema meets David, she's nine. David's fourteen. Her accent's still fresh and intact. It's only been twenty months since she's been living in Elizabethtown, New Jersey, America. She misses Bangladesh and the tea vendor who sat outside her house on Chowringhee Lane. She remembers when the street name had been changed to *Chowringhee*—six months before she'd left. Hema had been pleasantly shocked at the change—it had been the name of an art-house film directed by Aparna Sen in 1981. She hadn't been born then, of course. The movie's from Calcutta (India)—a favorite of Amal's.

Then they'd all moved to New Jersey.

Here, no one knows about Chowringhee Lane.

Hema sits on the mattress in David's basement. She suddenly misses Sylhet's yellow heat and buzzing ambient noise always in the background. This basement's dark and windowless. The only sounds are David's grunts and the television's emissions.

Hema sighs. "David...you know...there's a David in *Bringing Up Baby*."

"Why don't you speak like everyone else?" David taunts. His focus's on the television. *Mortal Combat*'s top priority. "You know, you sound like a *freak*."

"I do not!" Hema furrows her brows. Continues looking at the television screen. Controller sitting in her hands.

“Yes, you do.” David pushes down on his controller hard, making sure he makes the right move. “I win.”

“You always win. That isn't fair!”

“You don't even try to play!” Then David turns to her. Smirks. “What're you going to do? Tell your *Ma*?”

“No.” She won't look at him. She won't look at him. She won't cry. No. No. No. He's always so mean.

“Thought so.”

David's a mix of Rafi Uncle and Sandra—a mix of Bangladeshi and white. Blond curls; he's in need of a haircut. Olive skin. His mother's small grey eyes. Sitting down, there's nothing awkward in his posture. He'd be pretty if her were a girl. But he has cuts and scrapes and a mean mouth that's always pinched up.

Hema sits at the very edge of the mattress, as far from David as possible. Limbs all jumbled together: she's contracted herself together. Her long hair's pulled back in a bun. She's wearing white. The dress's a toga.

Hema fiddles with the earring in her right ear. “I don't want to play this anymore. It's boring.”

David fires back. “I don't want to hear your accent anymore. It's annoying.”

“You're mean!” Hema stands up and looks down at him. Her hands are on her hips. She refuses to pout.

“Does it look like I care?” David doesn't bother to look at her. His focus's still on the television.

“I'm leaving.” She threatens.

“Go for it.” He’s still looking at the screen. He begins another game. Hema makes sure to stomp loud enough up the stairs for him to hear. She’s going to the kitchen. The parents are there. She goes to her father. Makes him move over in his chair so she can share the seat with him. Listens to the grown ups’ conversation until Sandra asks her why she’s left David.

Chitra stands up. Looks at Amal, as if motioning to leave. Sandra stands up, too. She says, “Oh, the men are getting boring. Do you want to take a walk in the yard? We can have some time to talk to each other.”

Rafi Uncle, laughs at Sandra. “Don’t pretend you aren’t interested in this conversation.”

Chitra stands up. Her chair scrapes against the kitchen’s tiling. “Yes, but talking about Bangladesh’s liberation war for the past two hours has been exhausting.” She looks at Amal, “We should go. It’s getting late.”

“Oh, Bhabi, sit down, sit down. The night’s just begun. Let’s enjoy ourselves!” Rafi says, slapping the table. He always sounds so jolly. He laughs. It sounds like the *Pillsbury Doughboy*. One night, Hema overheard Chitra telling Amal that Rafi should’ve been a classical singer. He would’ve sung Rabindra sangeet so beautifully. Hema doesn’t

think someone with a mustache and a potbelly—albeit a small one—should sing Tagore's poetry.

Chitra smiles politely. "You forget Bhai-sahab, we have children these days. We have a different lifestyle to maintain." She pulls her achal around her shoulder, covering her exposed back. "We are not so young anymore...you know."

Amal looks up at his wife. Hema notices Chitra's gaze's aimed at Rafi Uncle's whiskey glass. There's no alcohol in her house. Alcohol's bad. This she understands. Sandra stands outside the circle around the kitchen table. She's already feet away, leaning against the counter. "Come Chitra, let me show you my roses. After so many years of trying, I think I've finally managed to figure out how to grow them."

Hema notices Amal looking at Chitra. He's concentrated on her face.

Chitra looks at Amal. She's pursed her lips. She turns to Sandra. "What kind? Chinese roses? We used to have those along the side of our house in Bangladesh."

Amal nods his head. Turns to Rafi Uncle. Hema lays her head on Amal's lap. Amal lifts her up onto his lap. She shuts her eyes, leaning against his chest. Amal strokes her. Hema hears Chitra's sandals click across the kitchen floor. Sandra always wears quiet shoes. Like a ninja.

"You baby that girl." Rafi says. And when both the women are entirely gone from the area, he adds, "Bhai-sahab, your wife's a strict one."

Amal laughs. "What can I do? Baba and Ma found her. I looked at her. Those eyes were pretty. She was just the right height for me. I said yes."

Rafi slaps his knee. Laughs that laugh of his. “You were always the soft one out of the two of us.” Cracks his knuckles. “Hey, remember in grade school, how I always had brilliant ideas...”

“That always got me in trouble?” Amal finishes.

Rafi Uncle laughs.

“Yes, I remember.” Amal stops stroking Hema. He fingers single strands of Hema’s hair. She hears the sound of the strands. That...singular noise hair makes. Not entirely a crunch. But the friction it creates when being rubbed between a man’s thumb and pointer finger. She fidgets some, situating herself more comfortably. Still doesn’t open her eyes. It’s nice to hear their voices.

Rafi Uncle says, “Hema’s like you, you know that?”

“How?”

“Those long limbs. She’s lanky. She’ll grow, though. You did, too...You’ll need to find her a tall husband.”

“Find her a husband?” Amal runs his hand through her hair.

“You think Chitra’ll accept a love marriage?”

Amal shrugs his shoulders. Hema’s body moves up—then down—along with them. “Either way, I do not see why you would be advocating my finding a husband for my daughter. I would assume you would advocate my letting her find love.”

Rafi Uncle laughs.

Amal goes, “Shh.”

Rafi chuckles. “She’s asleep?”

Amal shrugs his shoulders again. Hema reminds herself to remain calm.

Otherwise, her eyelashes will flutter from nervousness.

(A pause in conversation.)

Rafi Uncle breaks the silence. “You know, sometimes I wonder what life would’ve been like if I hadn’t married Sandra...you know...if I went back and did what Ma and Baba wanted.”

Hema feels Amal’s head jerk back. “What? You are not happy?”

“I didn’t say that. Just saying...maybe things would’ve been easier.”

Amal moves forward. Hema slips down a little in his lap. “What?”

“I’m not in touch with my parents. Nobody in the Bangladeshi community—except for you—is in touch with me. I’m...an outcast.”

“You knew what you were doing. You chose this lifestyle.” Amal shrugs his shoulders. “Be happy with what you have now.”

“I’d expected more compassion from you...must be Chitra’s influence on you.”

Amal says nothing.

“I’m only joking. Don’t look at me like that...”

“What are you missing in your life, exactly, Rafi?” Amal’s voice sounds harsh. Like when he punishes Hema for talking back to her mother. “The Bangladeshi community here...everyone is close-minded. They are more backward than at home. I cannot stand them, even...and besides...Sandra makes an attempt to be a part of it the community. You are the one who refuses to see if that will work...And your parents? They’ll come around. Go home. Take Sandra. And David. They might not approve, but they cannot turn you out of the house. Not after this long.” Amal pauses, as if in thought.

“What else? Religion? You prayed a handful of times the entire time I knew you in Bangladesh. I remember, they used to hit you when we recited Quran. You would always purposely mispronounce everything. Make a joke out of all the verses... You are not a pious man.”

“I’m not religious, I know.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

Hema peeks one eye open. Rafi Uncle sees her. She shuts it quickly. “I don’t know,” he says. “You still don’t drink, huh?”

Amal chuckles. Hema feels it. “No. And I will not.”

“Always the good boy.”

During the car ride home, Hema pretends to be asleep in the back seat. Chitra’s quiet the first ten minutes of the ride. Then, suddenly, she turns the radio off (news station). “You know, I do not like Sandra.” She adds, “At all.”

“Why?” Amal asks. “She is a good woman.”

“But a bad influence on Hema.”

Amal sighs. “How?”

“Wearing those sleeveless clothes in front of Hema. The whiskey. And she is not Muslim...”

“First of all, Chitra. You used to wear sleeveless blouses with your saris.”

Chitra quickly interrupts him, “Yes, when we first married... That was the style then. And I was modest. And I don't anymore, anyways.”

“Sandra is also modest.” Hema eavesdrops. Quickly thinking back of what Sandra was wearing. Just a beige, sleeveless, long dress.

“Well, she serves alcohol!”

“Rafi *drinks*. Not Sandra. Have you ever seen her drink?”

“No.” Chitra adds, quietly, “She says it is bad for the skin.” Then, quickly, “Of course it is bad for the health. If it were not bad for you, it would not have been banned in the first place.”

“*And*, if you are worried about her being Christian, why are *you* not a better Muslim example?”

Hema hears Chitra go “Hmph.”

A few moments later—thirteen moments, according to Hema's calculation—the car comes to a stop. Amal gets out of the front seat. Opens the back door. Picks Hema up. Carries her to the front door. Waits for Chitra to open it. Hema continues to feign sleep.

She hears Chitra say, “See...you spoil that girl!”

Hema, lying in bed. She can hear her parents through the thin wall separating her room from theirs.

Amal's voice first, "What is this, Chitra? All of the sudden, you are so concerned with...piety...And...with being so *Bengali*. Why?

"Why what?" Her voice's so shrill compared to his.

"Why are you so paranoid?"

"I am not paranoid. I just...want to preserve our culture."

"It is *preserved*."

"Hema takes all this...film-*i* things so seriously. She treats it all so...importantly. And everything surrounding her, it is all so...American."

"We live in America, Chitra."

"It just frightens me."

"Do not be. We are her parents. She will not *forget* where she is from."

Hema wakes up to find Amal's making breakfast (the clang of pan against stove top woke her up). Chitra's praying in the bedroom. She's bowed in devotion, forehead pressed against the prayer rug. Hema tickles her feet. They twitch. Hema does it again. They tense up. Hema does it one more time. Then leaves the room. She goes to the

kitchen. Stands at the doorway. Watches Amal for a moment. Then goes to him. Presses herself against him. Inhales his smell.

He ruffles her hair.

She swats his hand away. "Baba..." She groans.

"You want eggs, Hema?"

"I loathe eggs."

"Loathe?" Amal scrapes the pan with a spatula.

"It means hate." Hema's scrunches her eyebrows...like a caterpillar in motion.

"Didn't they teach you anything in college?"

"I teach Physics at a community college, Hema." He plates scrambled eggs.

"That doesn't mean you didn't learn words." She puts her hands on her hips. "By the way, the other day, David told me I have an accent." She scrunches her nose this time. Eggs smell awful.

"Yes...well...English was not your first language."

"So?"

Chitra walks into the kitchen. Her hair's matted down from the scarf she wore when praying. Hema moves to stand next to her father.

"Hema..." Chitra begins.

Amal sees the look on Chitra's face. "What did she do now?"

"She was tickling my feet while I was in sajdah!" Chitra walks toward Hema.

"You are going to make me foul my mouth and mood in the morning, bad child."

"I was only playing." Hema pushes her shoulders back.

Chitra breathes in deep. "Oh...child...you are too much!" Chitra moves into the dining space. She pulls back the curtains. Sunlight falls into the room. She looks out the window. "Hema, go pray."

"What?" she asks. The childishness in her voice revealing itself in a squeak.

"Go. Pray."

"I don't want to." Hema looks up at Amal. A silent plea.

Amal breaks in, "Chitra, the prayer time is almost done. It will take her forever even to wash up to pray."

"With you around, Amal, she will never pray!" Hema watches Chitra walk into the living room. She hears the television go on. Saturday mornings, there's an Indian program on the public channel that plays the latest Hindi movies' music videos. Chitra never misses this.

Hema chuckles to herself. Shakes her shoulders purposely.

Amal watches her. "What is so funny?"

Hema stops. Her face becomes serious. "Nothing."

Hema and David are in David's basement, again. Hema's accent's only noticeable when she speaks slowly, now. David's informed her of this development. She makes sure to always speak rapidly.

"We should watch a movie," she suggests. She's on the mattress. Chin cupped in hands. Stomach on the bed. Back exposed to the ceiling. She's wearing a sleeveless dress. Beige-colored.

David's crouched close to the television. He's playing *Mario Brothers*. "Shut. Up."

"You know, I saw *Breakfast at Tiffany's* the other day. It's really good."

"Do you ever watch movies from...oh...I don't know...the *present*?"

Hema flops on to her back. "Yes." Her hand begins to reach for her chest. To feel the lumps growing there. Then stops. David's here. She sighs. "There's never anything to do in this house."

"Then why do you come?" David still hasn't turned back to look at her. She stares at the back of his head.

"Mum and Baba make me." She adds, "You need a haircut. The curls make you look like a girl."

"Shut up." The television plays a little song. Mario dances across the screen. "I win."

Hema lets out a little shriek.

David turns around. He looks at her. She stares back. Nothing's wrong with Hema. "Freak."

It's her turn to say, "Shut up." She does. Hema sits up. "I'm going upstairs."

“And I care because?” David’s begun the next level of the game.

“Ugh.”

She walks into the kitchen. Catches Sandra mid-sentence in conversation with Chitra. “...doctor says it’s late.”

Hema interrupts, “Ma, where’s Baba?”

“Your Rafi Uncle and Baba went to a car dealer.”

“Why?” Hema throws herself on to a kitchen chair.

Sandra cuts in, “Rafi wants to buy a red *Corvette*.”

Hema laughs. “Mid-life crisis? God, he’s so...predictable.”

Sandra laughs at this, too. “Don’t let him catch you saying that.” Chitra remains silent. Hema looks at her mother. Smiles at her. Chitra looks away. Sandra says, “You’ve got such a smart little mouth on you. Then she adds, “That man can be so difficult sometimes.”

“I’m bored.”

Sandra frowns. “What’s David doing?”

“Playing video games.” Hema’s laid her left cheek on the table top. It feels cool against her skin.

“Hmm...go watch television?” Sandra suggests, playing with the tea at the bottom of her cup, tilting the cup left and right.

Hema sits up quickly. “I forgot...you guys have *cable*.” She laughs and rushes to the living room.

There's nothing to watch on television. She tosses her head against the back of the arm chair. Let's out a little shriek. No one comes to see why she does this.

On the night of her seventeenth birthday, Hema sits up straight, just as Chitra has taught her to. But it isn't because of Chitra that Hema's so proper. Hema's pretending to be Eliza Doolittle (from *My Fair Lady*), and consequently, Audrey Hepburn. Hema's wearing her hair in some sort of complicated bun, a shirt with a high, ruffled collar, and a blue, knee-length skirt. (Chitra's already scolded her for baring her legs. She's worn nude pantyhose. Chitra still thinks she'll burn in Hell for showing so much flesh.) The movie's paused on the television screen in the family room: the scene where Professor Higgins meets Eliza for the first time. (Amal's watched this movie with Hema countless times. He's the one who told her there's an Indian version made in 1980, *Man Pasand*.)

Hema feels she's too tall to dress as the Indian Eliza.

"Hema," Amal says quietly.

"Yes, Baba?" She tilts his ear towards his voice.

"It is your birthday today, no?"

"Yes." She peers up from her plate. Even the eyeliner she's applied specifically, in hopes of making her eyes appear larger, more Audrey Hepburn-esque.

"And you have turned seventeen?"

"Yes."

"You are going to go away to college this year."

"Yes, I know." She makes sure to hide the excitement in her voice.

Chitra, all this while, sits in her chair, watching the exchange between father and daughter.

"I have something for you."

"A birthday present?"

“Yes, I suppose that is what it would be called.” Amal pulls out the shopping bag from under the table. “I think you will like this.”

She wants to snatch the bag out of his grasp. But, she stays in character. Accepts it gracefully, a small smile playing on her lips. “Thank you.” She opens it and pulls out the black messenger bag. Square-shaped with a gold, buckle clasp. Now, she’s snapped out of character. “Just like the one *Alice* had!” She sighs.

“You like it?” Amal smiles.

“I *love* it.”

The next morning, Hema, at the breakfast table (Sunday), declares, “I want a job.”

Chitra’s teaspoon clanks against the teacup. “Why?”

“So I can have some money.”

“You come to us, your parents, for that.” Chitra’s leaning forward, palms pressed against the tablecloth.

“*Ma*, I need to start becoming independent.” Hema’s tapping her fork against her plate. The glass in front of her. She taps out the hit song from the Hindi film *Aradhana*.

Amal, stern, says, “Not now, Hema. After you graduate from high school.”

“But—“ Hema begins.

“Not. Now.”

Chitra looks at her husband, Hema thinks, with relief.

They're so strict. About everything.

II

Senior year of Hema's high school career. She's more anti-social than ever before. She pretends she's Maggie from *Funny Face*. There's no point in talking to these people. They don't know the difference between Tagore and Bharatanatyam. Hema dresses in all black. Wears flat shoes. And reads a book of Bukowski's poetry in between classes.

Chitra and Amal don't allow her to go out with people from school. She goes to school in the morning (takes the bus). Comes home after school (takes the bus, again).

She watches films at home.

And reads—poetry—all the other times.

Her one scruple: her body's nowhere near as slim as Audrey Hepburn's. And it never will be. She's been gifted with curves. And, she's tall.

Hema's discovered *Anna Karenina*.

She's read it once in order.

Twice out of order, reading chapters here, there.

And once backwards.

She's also watched every rendition of it available on VHS and DVD. Repeatedly. The librarian at the public library—the gray-haired one she always chances to go to at the check-out counter—looks at her a bit odd these days.

Hema comes home from school. Only thirteen more weeks of high school. Then she'll be treated as her own woman. She'll be in college. NYU.

She sighs.

This is what bliss must feel like.

This *is* bliss.

This...this feeling of...approaching something...*exciting*.

A new life.

She stands at the front door, not wanting to turn the knob. The key dangles from the lock. Hema mentally smiles.

This will be good.

She turns the knob. Opens the door. Walks in. takes off her shoes. Goes to her room. Takes out her home clothes. Goes to the bathroom. Showers. Chitra doesn't want the outside's dirt in her house.

In the shower, while shampooing her hair, the thought enters her mind: her parents never had any children after her. She wasn't *that* much trouble as a child, right?

She finishes showering. Turns the faucet off. Dries herself off. Stands in front of the sink, naked. Stares at the reflection. She *could* be pretty. But there's something weird about her features. Something...funny.

She's just...unusually beautiful.

Of course.

Chitra knocks. "Hurry up! I have to get the laundry basket."

Hema rolls her eyes. Then looks at the reflection again.

At the dinner table, Hema picks at her rice grains. Separates them. Makes a flat plain of rice on the plate. She looks up. Finds Amal watching her. She smiles at him.

"Stop picking at your food, Hema," he says, gently.

Chitra's eyes flicker to her plate. "Eat, please. You are growing so thin these days."

"I want a car," Hema says, not looking up from her plate.

"Why?" Chitra asks.

Hema shrugs her shoulders. "I might as well drive around. I mean, I *do* have a license."

"Where are you going to go?" Amal asks.

Hema doesn't answer. Instead, the thought of love comes to mind. She wonders what it's like to fall in love. To be loved. To be kissed. She wants this. She wants love. Romantic love.

“Ma, I want a haircut.” Hema’s at the breakfast table, looking at Chitra’s back. Chitra’s at the sink, washing a mug.

“Why?”

“I want shorter hair.” School starts in fifty minutes. She’ll miss the bus if she doesn’t hurry.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I said so, Hema.” Chitra turns around, her sari’s achal tucked in at the waist. “Hurry up! You’ll miss the bus.”

Hema stands up. “If I had a car, it wouldn’t matter.”

“Go!” And as an afterthought, Chitra adds, “Come home safe.”

Hema stands at the bus stop. She’s got both hands tightly around the straps of her bag. Her body’s tense. There has to be some way to make this happen.

She’ll ask Amal.

But Amal will only tell her to go to Chitra.

She's got so many cut-outs from magazines of this hairstyle. She's got so many mental images of actresses with this hairstyle. And it'd look *so* good on her. The bangs would frame her face, bringing attention to her eyes. The short length would be dramatic.

The bus arrives. She's the first one on. It's empty. She sits near the front, smashed against the wall of the bus, away from the aisle. On the way to school, she imagines what she'll look like with new hair. She'll, of course, need to buy new clothes to match. Frilly, lace blouses and soft colored pants won't work. She'll need *edgy* clothes. Her heart palpitates when she realizes this last detail.

She wishes the bus had air conditioning. Public school funding just doesn't pay for the important things.

Hema, during lunch, goes to the library. She fingers book after book, dragging her index finger's nail across their spines as she walks down the aisles. The school's library's so limited. She's read all the good books already. There's nothing to read. Nothing to read. Nothing. To. Read.

She hums to herself.

She takes that index finger, and begins to wrap it around strands of hair. The hair feels slick and soft. She smells it. And it smells good.

The titles don't whirl past her. She walks slow enough to read the titles. *The Royal Diaries* series. She's read all fifteen of the books *Scholastic Press's* come out with so far. Apparently, someone's checked out *Jahanara: Princess of Princesses*. Jahanara was Shah Jahan's daughter. He'd built the Taj Mahal for his wife after her death. And, also, after her death, Jahanara was the most important person in Shah Jahan's life.

Hema thinks of Amal. She wonders if Amal will build a mausoleum when Chitra dies.

She laughs at herself.

Out loud.

In the empty library.

The librarian looks over her glasses at Hema. The librarian purses her lips. She bites back a smile.

He probably wouldn't.

They don't love each other in that way. Theirs is a...it's...an *arranged* love. No passion there. Just...an agreement. She feels the urge to shudder.

When Amal crosses into the house after work, he finds Hema waiting near the door. He stops himself abruptly, almost rushing into her. "Hema!"

"Baba." She smiles at him and takes his coat.

Amal looks at her suspiciously while rolling his sleeves up. He kicks off his shoes. Hema bends down to straighten them against the shoe rack. Amal crinkles his eyebrows.

"How was your day, Baba?"

"Fine. How was yours?"

"Oh. Fine." She follows him into the living room and begins to follow him towards the bathroom.

"What is it, Hema?" Amal asks. "Why are you following me like this?"

"Huh?" Hema steps back. "I don't want anything."

"Want something..." Amal nods his head. "I'm going to the bathroom."

Hema doesn't follow him there.

At the dinner table, Hema makes sure to be good. She eats everything Chitra puts on her plate. She tells Amal about how well she's doing in school.

Hema doesn't pick at the friend eggplant on her plate. She buries it under the rice and swallows it, careful not to chew too much.

“Ma, you know, I can do the laundry after we’re done eating. If you want...”

Amal raises his eyebrow. Hema smiles at him.

Chitra cautious, says, “No. You will ruin it. I will do it.”

“Well...I can iron the clothes piling up on the ironing board.”

Chitra, less cautious, responds quicker, “No. You do not know how to iron!”

Hema slumps in her seat and holds herself back from whining *I was just trying to help*. She looks down at her plate. Even when she’s trying to be a good daughter.

“Whatever,” Hema grumbles.

“Sit up straight, Hema,” Amal says.

Hema sits up, shoulder blades pressed against the chair. She sighs.

Chitra gets up to clear the table. Hema *was* going to help clear the table and wash the dishes. But she’s changed her mind. She hears Chitra clanking the plates against one another. Hema frowns.

Hema gets up and goes to the bathroom and washes her hands there. She looks in the mirror and imagines herself with that haircut. No, she can’t lose her motivation. She has to be good. Maybe Amal will agree to take her.

She breathes in deep and pushes her shoulders back.

Hema opens the bathroom door and the hallway’s yellow light hits her (as opposed to the bathroom’s white light). She walks to Amal, who’s sitting on the sofa, watching *Jeopardy!*.

“Baba,” Hema begins.

“Hmm?” He doesn’t look away from the television.

“Can you take me to get my hair cut, please?”

"Ask your mother."

"I did."

"And what did she say?"

Hema pauses. "*No.*"

"Then, no." Amal doesn't even look away from the television.

Hema sits down next to him and touches his arm. "Please." She waits for some reaction from him. He does nothing. "Please." Still nothing. "*Please?*"

"No." Amal looks at her. He sounds so stern.

"But..." she starts.

Chitra walks in with two mugs of tea. She hands one to Amal. "Chai."

Hema huffs and goes to her room.

Hema won't give up. She lies on her bed with the lights turned off. She leaves the blinds open. The moonlight filters into her room and reflects off the closet door mirror. She turns on the radio and keeps the volume low. Shaggy plays. He can't be blamed for adultery. Hema smiles into her pillow. Men are such stupid, stupid creatures. She thinks of doing her homework. There are Calculus problems. And chapters to read out of the American History text book. *And*, there's that poem to write for English. Bleck. She's not a poet. David always makes fun of her. *So dramatic, Hema. You think you're so deep.* His

laugh. That laugh grates against her ears. Makes her cringe. Hema shudders in bed. He makes fun of the way she dresses. The way she sits. The attention she pays to her physical presence. *You're so shallow. So vain. Focused on all the wrong things.* Wrong. Wrong. Wrong. Again a shudder runs through her. She gets under the covers.

Now she feels hot.

She's on top of the covers, again.

There's a knock on her door. Before she can say *Don't come in!* Chitra opens the door. "What are you doing, Hema?"

"Lying here."

"Why? What is wrong?" Chitra's still at the door. She's letting in light from the hallway. This irritates Hema.

"No reason."

"Do you feel unwell?"

"No." Hema's covering her eyes with her forearm.

"You do not have homework?"

"I'll do it in a little bit."

"When will you sleep? It is already so late."

"I'll be fine. Don't worry."

Chitra sighs and turns to leave.

Hema calls, "Shut the door."

Chitra pulls the door shut. Hema hears the click of it closing.

Hema goes back to thinking of David. He's mean.

No.

That's a lie.

He's like her. He's...tough and flinty.

This time Hema laughs out loud. And she doesn't stifle the laugh into her pillow.

She listens to it.

David and Hema sit in David's basement. She's lying on the mattress. He's sitting on the floor, leaning against the television, looking at her.

"What'd you say if I cut my hair?" she asks, staring at the ceiling.

"Why're you always thinking about how you look?" His arms are crossed. He's staring at her.

"Just answer me."

He shrugs his shoulders. "Wouldn't make any difference to me."

"You don't think I'd look prettier?" She flips over to her side, balances her head on her palm, and looks at him.

"I'd have to think you were pretty to think a hair cut would make you prettier."

She frowns. "You don't think I'm pretty?"

He shrugs his shoulders. "You're not ugly."

"You're such an asshole." He doesn't say anything in response to this, but only continues to stare at her. "How come you don't have a girlfriend?"

David crosses his ankles. "Cause I'm waiting for my parents to set me up with a nice, Bengali girl."

She laughs, cocking her head back. She straightens her neck and puts a serious look on her face. "Right."

"I'm serious, Hema."

She watches the muscles in his neck move up, down. "You're a freak."

He grins. "You love it." She doesn't say anything in response, but only stares at his neck. "How come you don't have a boyfriend?"

"Same reason as you."

It's David's turn to laugh. And he does. "You're so full of shit. You're just waiting to get out from under your parents, aren't you?"

Hema shrugs her shoulders. "All I know's I'm going to school *away* from home."

David laughs louder at this. "We'll see."

"Why're you even home, now? Shouldn't you be in New York?"

He shrugs his shoulder. "Home for the weekend."

"Aren't you graduating?"

"Yep. A few months left."

Hema sighs. She stands up. "Peace, yo."

"Don't say 'yo.' You sound like a boater."

"Fuck you." She's standing at the staircase now.

"Oh, and don't swear, either. You're accent really does come out."

"You're really still an asshole." She starts going up the stairs.

"Where are you going?"

"Upstairs. I bet Ma's having a heart attack imagining all the things we could be up to...alone...down here...in a dark, quiet room."

"Lord," David mutters.

"Exactly." She goes up a few more stairs. "Peace."

Upstairs, in the kitchen, Sandra's at the stove, stirring something in a frying pan. Chitra's sitting at the kitchen table, chin in hand, watching Sandra. Hema walks across the kitchen tile quietly, wondering when the women will realize she's there. Neither speaks to the other.

"What're you cooking?" she asks, going up to Sandra. Hema leans against the counter.

"Stir-fry. Thought I'd try and make some Chinese."

Hema breathes in the aroma. "Smells good." She angles her body better to get a look at Chitra. Chitra's sitting upright. Hema imagines her ears to have perked up. She smiles to herself.

"How's school, Hema?" Sandra asks, looking at Hema while still stirring the vegetables.

"It's good."

"You're applying to college right now, right?"

"Yep."

"How's that going?"

Hema shifts weight from one foot to another. She crosses her arms. "All right."

"Where are you applying?"

"Mmm...mostly schools in the City."

"Yeah?" Sandra raises her eyebrows. "That's where Amal and I met. We were both in school then." Sandra chuckles.

"I've already been accepted to NYU..." Hema sneaks a glance at Chitra. Chitra hates when Sandra calls Amal by his name. It's so rude of a wife to do so. "Wait," she

responds to the bit about how Sandra met Amal, “Really?” She looks back to Sandra. Of course, that *is* what an American wife does—calls the man she loves by his name. Not like she knows any better.

“Yeah...I was finishing up my Master’s degree. Amal was already working. I was working at the public library. And he’d always go in there to check out Hindi movies. I thought he was attractive. So I asked him out—“

Hema cuts her off. “Wait. *You* asked *him* out?” Hema’s standing straight now, her body tense.

Sandra shrugs her shoulders. “No point in beating around the bush. I liked him. I wanted to know if I had a chance.”

Hema whistles. “Wow.” She loosens her muscles.

Sandra laughs. “Oh get over it, Hema. Not like you girls don’t do things like that these days.”

Chitra enters the conversation now. She walks over to Hema and Sandra. “My daughter does not fraternize like that with men. She knows her boundaries. She is a good girl.”

Hema rolls her eyes. “Ma, knock it off.”

Sandra smiles. “Chitra, just because she goes out with a guy for ice cream doesn’t mean she’s sinning. She won’t burn in Hell for it.”

“What do you know about being Muslim, Sandra?” Chitra snaps back. Chitra’s mint green, georgette sari seems to make her look gaunt.

“Plenty, Chitra. All I’m saying’s that a bowl of ice cream and some conversation doesn’t lead to sex.”

Chitra lets out a little shriek. "Oh!" She quickly looks at Hema. "Sandra!"

"Oh, loosen up, Chitra. Hema's seventeen. She knows about all that." Sandra turns back to the stove, biting a smile back.

Chitra clenches her jaws. "Sandra, it is not appropriate to talk of this in front of her."

"*Ma*, don't worry." Hema turns to Sandra. "Besides, there's not really anyone to mack on. No one's Bengali and Muslim at school. Can you imagine what would happen if Ma and Baba caught me with a white guy? Or better yet...a *black* guy?" Hema laughs. Then sees the look on her mother's face. "Ma...*Ma!* I'm only kidding."

Chitra still looks mortified.

"Oh *Lord!* I was only *joking.*"

David walks into the kitchen. "What's cooking?"

"Shouldn't you be going back to the City?" Hema spits at him.

"You're a bitch."

"David!" Sandra exclaims. She spins around to look at him.

"Sorry Mom. Just kidding." She glares at him. "Just kidding." He backs away, dramatizing his defeat.

"Hema, go see where your father is...see if he is ready to go," Chitra commands.

"Oh, but Chitra, I'm cooking lunch for all of us."

"Yeah, Ma," Hema defends.

Chitra sighs.

Amal drives Hema to the public library. "Baba...Baba..."

"What?" He's staring at the road, his hands at the three o'clock and nine o'clock positions. He's such a careful driver.

"I really, really, *really* want that hair cut."

"Your mother said no."

"But, please!" She turns the volume dial down on the radio. "I'm older now. I'm about to go to *college*! I can't even choose how to style my hair?"

Amal sighs. "You have been going on about this for so long. Why do you care so much?"

"Because it matters to me how I look."

"Why, Hema?"

She shrugs her shoulders. "I don't know."

"It is not good to be so focused on your looks."

"What else have I got? Huh?" She gets an edge in her voice. "I don't have any real friends. I'm not allowed to go out. All I do's go to school and study and read and watch movies. I need something to focus on. A hobby. Something pleasurable."

"Reading is not enough?"

"You can't only read books to make yourself happy. You need to do something in life."

“So...you...what is it exactly you are trying to do? I do not even understand. You watch these movies. You read these books. And you always dress up and...and...I do not know, Hema.”

“Please, Baba. It means so much to me.”

“A hair cut? A hairstyle means this much to you?”

“Yes.”

“What if I say no?”

“I'll keep asking.”

Amal laughs, “We are here. You have got twenty minutes. Be quick.”

“I want that haircut, Baba.” She scampers out of the car and rushes through the library's glass doors. Amal's follows her in, walking slowly, hands in his pockets.

Hema and Amal return home with seven books and four movies. Chitra isn't home. He mutters, “She must have gone to the grocery store.”

“Baba, please, please, please let me cut my hair,” She begs, placing all her books and movies on the dining table.

He runs his right hand through his hair. “What do you want to do with it?” He's sitting on the sofa. The television isn't on.

“Just cut it and get bangs.” She’s standing at the threshold of both dining space and living room.

A sigh. “How short?”

Hema uses her hand to show him: just below her chin. “Just all one length.”

“That is...what...like five inches?” Amal slumps in his seat.

“Something like that.”

“Your mother is going to kill me.”

“No she won’t. She won’t say anything to you.”

“When?”

“As soon as possible!”

“Do you need someone to go with you?”

Hema’s smile falls away. Does Amal think she can do this by herself? She isn’t entirely grown just yet...

“I have work. I cannot take you...”

“But...”

Amal looks at his daughter’s face. He thinks for a moment. He bites his bottom lip. “How about this...I ask Sandra to take you.”

Hema’s face lights up. “That sounds perfect!” She clasps her hands together. “Baba, I love you! I love you! I love you!” She would kiss him on the cheek, if their relationship permitted it.

“Calm down, Hema. I have not talked to Sandra yet. And, on top of that, your mother will kill me when she finds out.”

“No, no, she really won’t.”

Amal turns on the television, sinking deeper into the sofa cushion.

“Baba?”

“Hmm?”

“Aren't you going to call her?” She's still standing, hands on hips.

“Who?”

“Sandra.”

Amal throws his head against the sofa. He sighs. “Right. Bring me the phone.”

Hema lets out a little yelp. She rushes to get the cordless receiver. She brings it back to Amal. She watches him dial the numbers.

“Hello...Sandra...Mmm...Hi...Good. Good...Listen, I could use a favor...” He chuckles, “So, Hema wants to get her hair cut and Chitra cannot take her...would you be willing to.....yes, I know about Chitra...I will talk to her...this is so important to her...she has been begging for weeks...yes, I know...I will talk to Chitra...she will understand...of course, I am asking you to do this...as soon as possible?...Now?” Amal laughs, “That would be amazing...How much...Oh, stop!...No, really, Sandra, that's not appropri—...Ok...Ok...See you in a bit.” Phone call ends.

Hema's standing directly in front of him. She's on edge, biting her bottom lip.

“So?”

“She is coming now.”

“Now?” Hema's so giddy she feels faint. “Oh *Lord*.”

“She says not to worry about the money. She is taking you to her hair salon.”

“Wow...”

“Yeah...” Amal adds, “Your mother is going to murder you...then me.”

“Oh, Baba, you’re so dramatic.” Hema drifts to her bedroom to make sure she looks acceptable.

Hema sits in front of her dresser. She caresses her hair. She hears the doorbell. Her heart thrashes against her chest. She wonders if her skin’s tight enough to keep it from bursting out. Faintness overwhelms her as breaths catch in her throat. She tells herself to calm down. She stands up. Checks herself in the mirror one last time. Then walks out to the front door. There’s Sandra and Amal.

“Hema! So I hear you want a haircut,” Sandra says, standing there in her trench coat. Hair pulled back in a bun. She looks simple. But, glamorous. This makes Hema smile.

“Yep.”

“Great. Well, let’s get going,” Sandra motions her towards the door. She—as an afterthought—turns around—and as comfort—says to Amal, “Don’t worry, I’ll bring your daughter back in one piece.” She turns to leave. Then turns around one more time, “You know, Chitra’s going to just *hate* me for this...”

“No. I will talk to her.” Amal leans against the doorway.

Hema laughs at this and skips out the door. In the car, Sandra plays classical sitar. “What’s this? Ravi Shankar?” she asks.

“Yeah. It’s a recording of that concert George Harrison had with Ravi Shankar in... ’71...I think...in Madison Square Garden.” Sandra’s a looser driver than Amal. She drives with one hand and even looks at Hema when she talks.

Hema nods her head. “I see.” She looks out the window.

“It was a great show...of course, I wasn’t there. History just says so...” Sandra’s hand turns the volume dial. “So what’s the plan?”

She looks at Sandra, eyes large and concerned, “Mmm...well...I want one length...and for it to hit right around the chin area...and bangs...right across the forehead.”

“Wow. That’s a pretty dramatic cut.”

Hema nods her head. “Kind of...you know...Cleopatra-esque.” She wiggles her eyebrows.

Sandra laughs.

“But...you know what’d be *really* cool?”

“What?”

“If I could dye my hair jet black...like...inky...blue-ish black. You know?”

“So do it.”

“What? No way. Ma would *kill* me.”

“Why? It’s not like it’d be *that* much darker than your natural hair color.”

“That *is* true.” Hema’s suddenly quiet. Deep in thought.

The hair stylist buzzes around Hema, clipping here, clipping there. He's got dyed red hair, gelled, spiked. She doesn't allow herself to crinkle her nose in distaste. Instead, she shuts her eyelids tight and says a quick prayer. *Bismillah*. He sprays her hair with solution, combs through it, measures its length, then clips some more. She hears the scratching sound of the scissors opening and closing. The indescribable crunch of hair strands being split into two. She cringes. He says, "Doll, you've got wonderful hair. So healthy." Hema breathes in deeply, then out. "Thank you." The whirring sound of dryers and chatter creates a numbing effect. She repeats a zhikr of just *Allahoo Allahoo Allahoo Allahoo*. He asks, "Is this a new hair style for you?" If ever she needed God's protection, it's now. "Yeah. I've never had my hair this short." Sandra's in the mirror's reflection—she's flipping through *People* magazine. The stylist's chuckling while stroking her hair. "You've got wonderful hair, really. And this color's just going to make you stand out! It'll be gorgeous. I know it." She bites her bottom lip and wonders what the black hair will look like when it dries properly. If Chitra were here, she'd probably be watching her, gauging every movement of the male stylist. She feels hunger. Or perhaps, worry. It's easy to confuse the two. He moves in front of her, leans in; she wonders if he can feel her breath. He combs the bangs, biting his lip in concentration. He begins to snip away at them. She prays he doesn't lop off her eyebrows or eyelashes.

In the car, Sandra puts her hand on Hema's shoulder. She can feel the palm's warmth. She relaxes her shoulders. "You can drive with one hand?" She fiddles with the bangs lying on her forehead.

Sandra chuckles. "Hema, you look gorgeous. I mean, you *really* look good." She grins. Hema notices all her teeth and their evenness. "My gosh girlie, you should've been born with jet black hair."

She plays with the hem of her shirt. "Thanks." Chitra isn't going to smile like Sandra's smiling. She won't be happy at all.

"Those eyes...they just...bore right into you..." Sandra trails off, thinking to herself. She smiles, looking out at the road. "You want ice cream or something?" She brakes suddenly. There's a red light.

Hema grips hard on to the edge of her seat. Her fingernails turn yellow from the pressure. "No, thank you."

"You sure? I bet the guy at *Cold Stone* would give you a free scoop."

Hema looks at Sandra blankly.

"You know... 'cause you're a little cutie..."

"Oh." Hema laughs, tilting her back until it hits the head rest. She exhales heavily. "Maybe another time. I'm not in the mood right now." To walk into the house with ice cream and Sandra and a new hairstyle...

Sandra breaks into Hema's thoughts. "You lie. I know you love ice cream." She crosses her arms over the steering wheel, making a left turn. Hema furrows her eyebrows.

Amal's told her so many times that it isn't safe to cross arms. She's supposed to pull the steering wheel through her grip.

"Mmm...maybe another time?" Hema looks at her hopefully. She doesn't want Sandra to think she doesn't want to spend time with her. "Sandra?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for taking me. Ma would never have brought me..."

"Oh, no problem. I'm glad I could help out." Sandra pauses. "You know, it's funny. I've always wanted a little girl of my own..." Her voice sounds wistful. "But after David, I can't seem to get pregnant again." She shakes her head. She presses her lips tight. Moves her hands to the three o'clock and nine o'clock positions.

Hema, not sure of how to react, so she says, "Oh."

Sandra continues, oblivious of Hema fidgeting in the passenger seat. "You know...Rafi's so stubborn, sometimes...he doesn't even want another child...as if David was hard to raise..." She sighs. "I'm sorry," she takes a quick glance at Hema, "I shouldn't be talking like this." She smiles. "You *do* look like a doll though. No. Scratch that. A model."

Hema laughs. "*Right.*"

"No, really..."

Chitra opens the door before Hema can take the house key out of her purse.

“Hema! Where...” Chitra’s voice trails off. “What...” She can’t seem to find words in her immigrant’s English. Hema feels a twinge of sorrow. This isn’t her mother’s native language. And so, it’s hard for her to express herself.

Sandra stands behind Hema, smiling. “Chitra, I took Hema to get her hair cut. Isn’t it gorgeous?”

“Hema...” Still Chitra grapples for words. Her right hand’s index finger and thumb pinch open and close, as if trying to catch air...searching for tactile language.

“Ma, what do you think?” Hema’s voice sounds stoic. But, really, she’s afraid it’s shaking.

Chitra closes her mouth. Breathes in. “Sandra, come inside, please.”

Interesting: Chitra’s inviting Sandra into her home without any scruple.

In the bathroom mirror, Hema looks at herself real close. She squints her eyes and tilts her head, angling it properly to get a good impression of herself. She handles her chin with her left hand, straightening the entire head back to proper positioning. She leans in over the sink, close enough to almost see her pores. This is Hema. Hema. She leans back into a proper, straight stance, her shoulders pushed back, spine straight, heels planted firmly on the floor.

She's not an ugly girl.

In the kitchen, Hema finds Chitra at the stove, turning the burner off. She's about to pour hot water into two tea cups. Tea for herself and Sandra.

"Ma, I want tea, too."

Chitra turns around to look at her daughter. She says nothing, but, "Ok."

Hema sits down at the table, opposite Sandra, smiling to herself. She can hear Chitra making the tea. She can hear the teaspoon hitting the sides of the tea cup. She can hear the teaspoon dropping sugar into the cups. She perks her ears, trying to listen to the sugar melting into the hot water.

Chitra brings Sandra and Hema their teacups, then goes back to the counter to get her own. She sits next to Hema. Hema can feel Chitra's gaze roaming over her. Chitra reaches out and strokes Hema's hair. Hema turns to her mother and smiles. "What do you think, Ma?"

"Hema, how could you?"

Hema shrugs her shoulders. She looks at Chitra's hair, wondering if it still feels the same as when she used to play with it as a kid. Long and silky and resilient. Smelling like coconut oil. She almost wishes Sandra weren't there. She'd reach out and touch it. She'd run her fingers through it. She'd make Chitra touch hers, too. She looks at Chitra.

Chitra looks as if she could cry.

This is when Sandra breaks into conversation. "I think Hema looks wonderful with black hair. Absolutely wonderful."

Chitra snaps back to her usual self. She smiles, strained. This is the exact moment when Chitra begins to get wrinkles around her eyes and mouth. "Yes. Black hair *is* after all, common in women from Bangladesh."

Sandra laughs. "Funny that Hema should be born with brown hair."

Chitra nods her head, taking a sip of tea. "Especially with this dark skin of hers." Leaning in, as if about to tell Sandra some conspiracy, she says, "You know, I do not know how that girl got the hair color she has. I dye my hair brown. And her father's hair is black as night." She leans back. Then as afterthought, she leans in again, and in a more hushed tone, says, "You know, I have tried to make her use so many home recipes to get lighter skin. She just will not listen to me."

Sandra looks appalled. "What on earth would you do *that* for? Hema's skin's gorgeous!" She sets her tea cup on its saucer, firmly. Hema hears the clank and wonders if the tea cup can survive that, or if it will chip, crack down the middle and split in half.

Chitra sits straight in her chair. "Yes, well, it would not be bad to be a little lighter. I do not know where she came to be so dark from. Both her father and I are light skinned."

Hema stands up, silent so far in the conversation. "I'm going to go take a shower." She pushes her chair in and looks at Sandra. "Thanks for taking me, Sandra. Means a lot."

Chitra corrects her, "Aunt Sandra."

Hema smiles at Sandra. "Yeah..."

"You *will* call her Aunt Sandra. You must respect your elders, Hema." Hema can sense that shrillness in Chitra's voice. It's masked with politeness. Chitra must be polite in front of others.

Sandra cuts in. "It's all right, Chitra. I'm fine with her calling me by name. We're friends."

"No." Chitra says abruptly, strictly. "You are *not* friends. She is younger than you. You are an *elder*." Chitra turns to Hema. "Do you understand, Hema? You must respect your elders. I will not have you run wild with no manners...with no etiquette. I *will* make a proper woman of you." She turns to Sandra. "And, I wish you would stay *out* of how I handle *my* family. You have your own at home. You stay with them. This is my daughter. This is my home. Things will be done how I want within these walls." Then Chitra breathes in. Un-furrows her brows. Smiles at Sandra. As if she'd never said anything. "Is your tea too cold? Do you want another cup? The kettle is still on the stove, you know."

Hema looks at her mother, awed by the eruption. Speechless. She turns around quickly and walks out of the kitchen, unwilling to be a part of that tea-scene any longer.

Hema and David are in David's basement, just like they've always been every Friday night, while their parents are in the kitchen, talking and drinking cup after cup of

tea. They've already had dinner—Sandra had made a pasta dish with spices and Indian vegetables. Hema can still taste the onion and garlic lingering on her tongue. She's thankful she hasn't burped back up her throat the taste of bay leaf. She hates *tej patta*. Hema's sprawled across the mattress in the middle of the room. David's sitting next to her head (which hangs off one edge of the mattress), playing video games.

“Why're you here, *again?*” she asks, twirling her hair around her index finger.

“Cause this is home, dumbass.” David's intent on the television screen. He's made it onto level thirty-four. He *still* plays video games.

“No, I mean...you don't have to be here...you could be away...at college...”

“I wanted to visit my parents.” David's blond hair's longer than before. She wonders whether he can afford a haircut. “And...I needed to get away from all that school shit for a hot minute.” He shrugs his shoulders.

“You want me to cut your hair?” she asks, sitting upright, leaning close to his neck. She wants to rifle through his curls with her fingers. Of course, she doesn't.

“No.”

“What do you think of my hair?” She's dangerously close to his skin.

“What about it?”

“Haven't you noticed anything different?”

“No.” David turns to look at her. “You're wearing a fucking hat.” He pauses, thinking. “Oh, you got bangs.”

Hema takes the knit cap off slowly, performing a strip tease. She grins.

“Holy...shit.”

She nods her head, grinning still.

“You got bangs...but...it’s...shorter...” He leans in closer, stroking the bangs away from her forehead. “And...it’s...*black*.”

She jerks away. “Hey!”

“Hema...you look...it’s so...weird...” His eyes are wide. He’s breathing through his mouth.

She can feel his breath hitting her face. She pushes herself backward, giving him room to take in the entire picture of her face and body.

“You look...” She can see his eyes roaming all over her.

She’s quick. “For someone in college, you’re awfully stupid.” She smiles. “String a few words together, man. I can’t make sense of you.”

He sits there, watching her. He sets his mouth in that firm way he has and pulls her neck towards him. He kisses her.

Her breath catches. This is her first kiss. What if Ma comes downstairs and finds them like this? This is her first kiss. Kiss. First kiss. Her first kiss. Ma will say she’s going to burn in Hell...if she ever finds out. Her first kiss. Hema pulls away. This is sin. But lightning hasn’t struck her down. Yet.

David’s hand’s still on the back of her neck.

She can feel his breath on her face. She leans her forehead against his. Her bangs create a barrier between their skins. Breathe in. Breathe out.

She tilts her head, wanting another. Her hands in his hair. The nervousness in her’s replaced by something else. His hands are pulling her toward him. With one hand, he moves her bangs away from her forehead, the other still on the back of her neck. She can hear his breath.

Like a faint sort of aftermath to an echo, Hema hears her father's voice, "It's time to go, Hema!"

Hema shoots up, unbalanced on her feet as the blood rushes to balance itself throughout her body. "I've got to go."

"Yeah. See you." She shudders before running up the stairs.

It's Hema's graduation morning. She sighs, still in bed. The sun hasn't risen yet. This time, her parents can't deny her womanhood.

Amal, after the ceremony, takes her to The Grand Hyatt in the City. She'd always wanted to stay there. But he takes her to the Manhattan Sky Restaurant for dinner. He's driven them both an hour and a half away from home.

"Hema," Amal begins, sitting at the table, a cup of coffee near his hand, "You know, this is a big change. You are not going to be home with us anymore."

"Yeah," she's looking up at the metal framework of the room. How can it be elegant with metal lining the interior?

"Listen, Hema. There are a lot of things you are going to run into the City."

She looks at her father, almost imagining him to be muted, pointlessly moving his lips. "Yes, I know that, too."

"No, Hema, you do not understand what I am talking about." His elbows rest on the table top.

It's eerily quiet. Too quiet. The glass walls give her a view of the rain outside and clouds and taxicabs and cars and rushing people. But she can't hear them. All she hears is her father.

And he's just let out a sigh. "Listen, I do not know how to break all this down for you. But do not forget: you are a good Bengali girl. Do not lose that."

She looks at him now, realizing this must be some serious moment in the scene. "Of course not, Baba." A piece of cantaloupe slides off her fork and onto her lap. "Fuck!" She's stained her white dress.

"Do you have to swear so much?"

She looks up at him. Eyes wide. She never swears.

III

Hema moves to New York City for college. She's going to study Film and Psychology (despite threats of Amal and Chitra's disappointment). She moves into an apartment. A dorm won't serve her needs. Besides, she says, "It's so much *cheaper* than the dorms."

They let her go, reluctantly. Chitra's one repeated line throughout the process—*I don't see why you can't commute.*

They help her situate herself there. Hema has an old sofa in the living room (it'd been originally stowed away in her parents' basement). Her father's old television set that used to be in the study. A new coffee table from *Ikea*—a modern piece, solid black and rectangular. The bedroom's furnished with a bed set that a family friend's bought her from another friend of a friend who's moving to Texas.

"Ma, I'm going to need a toaster," Hema says, sprawled out on the sofa (beige-colored and limp from over-use). Amal sits on the coffee table. Chitra stays standing and exhausted.

"What for?"

"So I can toast bread."

"Hema you are not *living* here. This is just for school. You live at *home*," Chitra says, walking to the television, wiping the screen with a wet rag in her hand.

"Of course," Hema replies. She gives the perfect eye roll. "I'm still going to need a toaster." The kitchen's currently empty, holding only two dinner plates, a cereal bowl, a set of spoons, and a microwave. Oh, and a pack of paper cups. The refrigerator's unplugged. There's also the small, breakfast table (with metal legs; very modern) and two

chairs standing against the wall. The windows are open. There's a half empty bottle of apple juice on the counter.

Hema lives in the apartment for two years and still continues living there, not moving back home during the summers. She justifies this by saying if she lets go of the apartment, it'll be difficult to find another one like it. Amal agrees, unhappily. Chitra only reminds Hema that it isn't home, "Just a place to live during school."

Hema works at a bookstore, always asking the owner for extra hours, in order to pay the rent. The manager, a forty-three year old divorcé likes to make her smile. She makes sure to take advantage of this vulnerability.

Hema sits at the cashier, looking out the window. The store manager comes out from the back room. "Hema!"

She doesn't bother to turn around. "Yes?"

"What're you doing?"

"Looking out the window." She swivels left and right, like a tease, almost close enough that he begins to see parts of a frontal view of her face. But then she the chair turns her away.

"Like a cat..."

She snorts.

He comes out of the back room and stands next to her, leaning against the counter. "Anything interesting?"

Hema would've cringed had this been any other forty-something year-old man. But she knows this one simply likes her in a clean sort of way. Or rather, she believes this one simply likes her in a clean sort of way. "Not really...just some old woman wearing skimpy shorts."

He crinkles his face. "Not a pretty picture."

"She's more your type than you'd think..." She laughs, tilting her head back.

He looks at her exposed neck. "You calling me old?"

"No. I never said that." She continues swiveling on the stool.

"It was implied..." He takes one step away from her. "How's school?"

"Oh...you know...the college student's life. Hell in class. Hell at home. Hell in the pocket."

He says nothing.

She continues, “You know...classes are a bit tiring. I’m short on cash...so...it’s a little interesting how I make ends meet.”

“I see...” Fred nods his head in understanding. “How about this...I talk to the owner about a raise?”

Hema’s grins. She looks at him. He finally gets a front view of her face. “You’d do that?”

“I guess so.”

“That would be...*amazing*.”

Hema maximizes her student loans to get refund checks for groceries and new shoes.

And, also, Amal hands her a check every time she goes home. Hema’s under the impression Chitra knows nothing about this. She—Hema—knows there isn’t much spare money in her parents’ bank account.

Hema's free to do as she pleases at college.

She sighs, relieved.

This is bliss.

At work, she meets the “intellectual type.” Many of them: this “intellectual type.”
Previously, she'd thought they only existed in Woody Allen movies.

Her life's playing out just as she imagined it might have.

These intellectuals invite her to lunch first, then to dinner, then to little “get-togethers.” And eventually, they accept her into their inner circle and transform her into the baby of their exclusive parties where there seems to be an endless supply of whisky, weed, and pretentious poses to stand in.

The men love to chase her around the parties, corner her, attempt to get a kiss, or a few of the digits of her phone number...they're all failed attempts. She likes to laugh at them and slip away.

Hema loves it all. Fits into it like a bourgeoisie hand slipping into her lace gloves.

Hema's cell phone vibrates. She jerks in surprise. Then looks around. “Hello?” She balances the cell phone between ear and shoulder while carrying a stack of books to the back of the store.

“Hema?”

“No, Ma. It's Minnie Mouse.” She can feel the phone begin to slip. She shrugs her shoulder in attempt to balance it properly.

“Hema! Don't play like that.” Hema can imagine Chitra fingering the phone line, twisting it around and around her fingers.

Hema sighs, annoyed. “Hi, Ma.”

Chitra sighs, now. “Have you eaten today?”

Hema rolls her eyes. “Yes, Ma.”

“What?”

“Cereal.”

“Why only cereal? Don't you have other food at home?”

“I didn't feel like making anything.” Hema's stacking books at the back wall of the store.

“So lazy...” Chitra begins.

Hema cuts her off, “How're you? How's Baba?”

“We are both fine.” Pause. “Are you coming home this weekend?”

Hema knows this question's coming. “No.”

“Why?” Chitra isn't a woman who whines.

“Because I have too much to do.”

“Are we never going to see you? What do you do there all the time?” Chitra sighs. She changes the topic. “How is that prayer rug your grandmother sent to you?” Hema's grandmother had sent a prayer rug from Bangladesh; mailed it to Hema's apartment. “Do you ever use it?”

“Fine. It’s really nice.” Hema isn’t going to just tell Chitra she doesn’t use it. Chitra’s sporadic moments—not periods—of piety haven’t affected Hema. She chuckles. It’s hanging in the very back of her closet, behind her new blue dress and denim trousers.

Chitra, through the line, “What?”

“Nothing.”

The door bell jingles as a customer enters. “Ma, I’ve got to go. Someone just came into the store.”

“Call me later.”

“Ok. Ok. Bye.”

“Hema, are you coming home this weekend?” Chitra asks.

“No, Ma.”

“Why not, Hema?” Amal asks. Chitra and Amal are on speaker phone.

“I’m busy.”

“With what?” Chitra has a shrill voice.

“Homework.”

"Hema, are you coming home this weekend?" Amal asks.

"No, Baba. Sorry."

Amal sighs. "Ok. But you tell your mother you're not coming."

"Do you want us to come and see you, Hema?" Chitra asks, softly.

Hema misses her parents, presses the phone harder to her ear, but says, "No, Ma."

"Why not? What do you do alone there?" Chitra asks.

"Nothing, Ma. I'm just busy."

"With what?"

"Homework."

"Don't go out without reason. Don't be bad. Be good. Be good!"

"Ok, Ma. I gotta go."

"Why? Why are you always so busy?"

Hema wants to growl. Instead, she sighs. "What do you want to talk about?"

"I do not know. What do you do all day?"

"Nothing. School. Work. Study. What do you do all day?"

"Just housework."

The phone line goes quiet after this. Neither says anything.

“Where’s Baba?”

“At work.”

“Oh.”

“Be good.”

Hema gets a phone call on a Friday midnight. She's painting her toenails a deep, dark, electric purple. The color's energizing her as she layers it over her nails. Hema's just buzzing with enamel-sparks. Perhaps the fumes are making her silly. She looks at her cell phone. *Home.*

Why...why...why do they call her this late?

"Hello?"

"Hema...what're you doing?"

"Nothing." She wonders if the wine's obvious in her voice.

It's Amal. But Hema can hear that sound...that inexplicable noise that reveals to the listener she's on a speaker. "I have some bad news."

"What?" They must know about David's kiss. Or maybe they saw her wearing that short skirt on Tuesday. No. They've realized she spends more money on wine than on milk. Hema's heart races. Her hand trembles. She holds the phone tighter. "What is it?"

"Sandra. Has. Cancer...Breast." Amal's careful in his pronunciation of the words, treating each syllable gingerly. She can see her father caressing each one with his tongue. He's as dramatic as she is.

"Oh."

Amal says nothing.

"Ok. Well I've got to go."

Chitra cuts in, "Be good, Hema."

"Bye."

The phone line hums, cut.

Hema waits for her nails to dry, enjoying the feel of walking around the apartment in a tank top and purple, lace panties. She feels free. She dances across the living room's wooden floor into the kitchen.

She stops.

Sandra. Has. Cancer...Breast.

Oh.

Hema lies on her bed. Blinds shut. Light off. Slivers of street lamp light seep in through the cracks between vertical blinds. Her right forearm lies across her eyes.

Sandra has cancer.

Sandra has breast cancer.

Even after brushing her teeth, she can taste the wine on her tongue.

After her thirteenth birthday, Rafi Uncle began to ebb away from Sandra. She'd heard Chitra and Amal talk. He was depressed. Bitter. Sandra suffered. Sandra wasn't a

bad woman. Her father always defended Sandra. Chitra held some unaccountable grudge towards the woman.

Sandra was always so nice. So good. She was the perfect wife. Even with Bengali standards. With Muslim standards. She made David go to the local masjid. David, of course, never accepted Islam. He never recited the shahadah. But he never went to Church, either. Rafi Uncle had no issue with this. His son was like him. *I'm a spiritual man, Hema*. He'd said to her one night, sipping on his always-full whiskey glass. Those large eyes of his bearing into her. David's eyes were more like Sandra's, though. Grey and cat-like, tilting up.

She'd never seen Sandra drink. She'd never seen Sandra wear anything revealing. Chitra wore more revealing clothes. Those sheer saris. Those back baring blouses.

Hema lets out a shriek.

It's been a while since she's done that.

She imagines Amal opening her door, like he did when she was younger

He doesn't come and do this.

She lets out another little shriek and kicks her legs around, flailing in bed.

Looking in the mirror, naked, Hema realizes there's nothing remarkable about how she looks. She's got large, dark, almond-shaped eyes. White men. Black men. All but Bangladeshi men find this to be exotic, though.

It's really not.

Her nose could be exceptional, but it just isn't. It has the potential of making her seem arrogant. Unfortunately, it isn't turned up enough at the end.

A decently shaped mouth and chin. But perhaps the chin's a *bit* weak.

She does, thankfully, have unblemished skin. But, of course, it's dark. Chitra reprimands her for this all the time. "You stay out in the sun too long, stupid girl!"

But, Hema likes being dark. Almost purple. It makes her feel royal.

Sandra's, of course, overtaken by the cancer. She dies. And, of course, Amal, Rafi Uncle's only good friend, is obliged to go to the funeral. Hema comes home for this funeral.

"Oh, so you come home for Sandra, but not for your own parents," Chitra remarks.

Hema stops herself from rolling her eyes. She is, after all, a grown woman now.

Chitra, at first, refuses to attend the funeral. Always jealous of that woman. Hema says she will go with Amal. This makes Chitra change her mind. She will go with her daughter. A mother should go with her daughter to a funeral. Hema wears a black skirt and a black turtleneck. It's February. Gray. The day feels as if someone's taken a controller and pressed "mute."

In the car, Hema sits in the back seat, Chitra in the front passenger seat. Her father drives, not saying anything. "I think this is the first funeral I've ever gone too." Hema says.

"It is." His focus's on the road.

Hema doesn't smile.

"It isn't anything special, Hema," Chitra says, her voice tight with some emotion.

"Oh, no I wouldn't think *that*," she says, her hands folded in her lap. "Will there be many people there?"

"Maybe. I don't know," Chitra answers. Amal's mouth opens, as if Chitra answered the question too quickly... a question he wanted to answer.

"Will people cry?" Hema asks. This is all so new. She isn't sure how to behave. How to react. Sandra's given her a chance to experience something new.

"I don't know." Amal sighs. "Act your age, Hema! You are twenty-one for... a funeral should not be this amusing..." His sigh feels strange and out of context.

Hema's tall and leggy. She pulls her skirt down, afraid Amal will disapprove of her knees showing. Her hair's pulled back into a loose bun. When Chitra stood at the front door watching Hema put her shoes on, she'd told Hema she was reminded of the first day Sandra had invited them over for dinner, her hair was pulled back in the same way Hema's is now. Chitra said, "You look very unhappy, you know... You were not even that close to Sandra"

Hema had responded, "Ma, she was a really nice woman. We used to see her all the time. I'm allowed to be sad." Then she'd added, "Besides, I'm going to a *funeral*."

Amal looks at the road, an annoyed look now on his face. Hema knows he's annoyed. He always gets this twist to his mouth when he's annoyed. Hema, when in the bathroom fixing her hair (door open), heard Chitra say to Amal, "You always liked Sandra more than just as your friend's wife. Do not deny it." She'd spat the words at Amal. She hadn't merely spoken them.

Amal parks the car on the street and gets out. Hema and Chitra move quickly to keep pace with him. "Wait!" Hema says, as she catches up with him just at the front door. He rings the door bell. When it's open, he lets Chitra and Hema walk in before him. Amal looks around. Hema wants to ask, "Is there anything particular about being at an American's funeral? Should a Bengali girl behave a certain way?" But she doesn't. Amal's already walked up to Rafi Uncle. He's too far from her. A stony silence surrounding him. Chitra's mouth firm. She won't help Hema. Poor Hema, if only someone had scripted her lines for her. No worry. She'll improvise.

There are a handful of people. Family members, from what she assumes. Sandra and Rafi Uncle hadn't had many friends. Both cut themselves off from their social lives. First Rafi Uncle. Then Sandra. In a corner, there's David, standing, looking at all the people he (probably) doesn't know. He got his hair cut. His mouth's in that tight stance so natural to it.

Chitra approaches Amal. She lays her hand on his forearm, like a good wife. Her black sari's somewhat sheer. Hema can see her olive skin peeking out from under it as she stands by herself in the middle of the room. Eyes wide.

Hema wonders what it would take for her own eyes to fill with tears and for someone to offer a handkerchief with initials (preferably David's) stitched into one corner. She walks over to the casket (open) and peers inside. She immediately shrinks away. Then looks in again. It isn't so scary. Sandra looks pretty, as usual. Just a bit stiff. She's dead, of course. Her hair doesn't look any thinner or less blonde. Cancer hasn't taken away that.

Hema decides she wants a tragic death. Nothing like this one: where life slowly ebbs out of her. Maybe a plane crash. Or a fire. Snake bite venom. A stray bullet. Or maybe falling under a train (not a bus, though, that was far too cheap and ordinary). Something sufficiently tragic.

She looks at David. Wants to tell David that she's decided she wants a tragic death. But his hands are in his pocket. He looks straight at her. No smile. No grimace. His lips seem to form a straight line. She walks over to him, replaying in her head the moment when he'd kissed her. "I'm sorry... 'bout... you know..." Brigitte Bardot

would've said, "*Je m'excuse de votre perte.*" Only problem's that Hema isn't as busy and David probably wouldn't understand French.

Five weeks later, Chitra throws a party for all of their family friends. She's cooked for three days straight. Created a feast. Cleaned the house. Made sure the house shines with a warm ambiance. Her house's never looked so perfect. This is Chitra's night to shine. Be vivacious. Be beautiful. Be good. Hema smirks to herself as she realizes what her mother wants to be. She's, again, come home, from college. This time, just for the party. She watches Chitra bustle around the house.

Before the guests arrived, Chitra's managed to wrap herself in a plain, emerald green sari (plainness's her signature mark), a red bindi on her forehead, and her gold wedding bangles clinking against each other on her wrists. Chitra's aged gracefully.

She's in Hema's room, wrapping a cream sari—with red lining—around her daughter's waist. Perhaps there's something in the way that Hema looks...something that will allow her to be a tragic romance heroine...to be a heroine, one must be beautiful. This idea twists around Hema head as the sari circles around her waist over and over.

Hema wonders if she's beautiful. She asks Chitra this Chitra tells her girls should not ask such things. When Hema asks why, Chitra says, vanity is not a good thing to be in possession of.

Again, Hema asks.

Again, Chitra gives her the same answer.

Chitra stares at Hema and herself in the mirror. Her eyes widen. She asks Hema if she does bad things when she is away from home. Hema says she doesn't do anything bad. Chitra unfurrows her eyebrows and tells Hema to stop worrying about being beautiful. God makes everyone beautiful.

Hema fiddles with the loose end of her sari, still gazing into the mirror. "Wouldn't it be wonderful if I were an actress?"

"No."

"Ma?"

"Hmm?" Chitra's still looking at their reflection.

"I could be like all those women then."

"Don't be foolish, Hema. They are only stories."

"But, Ma, can you imagine? This is what Elizabeth Taylor saw when she looked at herself in the mirror."

Chitra laughs, something wary in her demeanor. "She saw you?"

Hema turns to Chitra now. "Of course not. I mean, she saw a...*mannequin*."

"You think you are a mannequin?" Chitra's eyebrows furrow.

Hema realizes then there's a difference between her mother and herself. Chitra isn't tall. She doesn't have Hema's body. Chitra doesn't have the hope of growing more beautiful. She's already been there. Chitra doesn't know what it's like to wait for the role of tragic heroine. "Never mind." Poor Ma. Hema fiddles with the folds of her skirt.

Chitra doesn't hear this last part. The doorbell's ringing. She's bustled out of the room and towards the front door.

Hema rushes from kitchen to dining room, and back, dining room to kitchen. She fills the table with platters of food. Dinner plates. Glasses. Napkins. All wearing a sari. Hema could be a Bollywood actress from the sixties. Her hair's pulled back in a high bun, bangs framing her face. She's wearing heavy liner (following the flair of Cleopatra). Pale cheeks and pale lips. All focus's on the eyes. Bangles cling-clang on her left wrist as she constantly uses her hands. The heels of her shoes sound loudly as she moves hurriedly.

In every mirror she walks past, she resembles the army colonel's motherless daughter in *Aradhana*. Like Vandana, she strides quickly, with that small smile playing on her mouth.

Chitra's invited Rafi Uncle and David. They come. Chitra speaks loudest when near Rafi Uncle. This makes Hema grimace. Hema doesn't understand her mother; but something in her feels as Chitra does, and so she, too, is affected.

Hema's on display tonight. When she serves drinks to the guests, she holds on to the glasses a moment too long. When she cuts slices of cake for dessert, she takes a second too long with the knife (holding the utensil just a little too limply with her wrist). She remembers to smile, but not show her teeth.

David's drawn to her; he stands only feet from her the entire night. When she serves the drinks, he's the first to get a glass. When she passes out plates of cake, he's at her right elbow, taking each plate from her. And when she smiles, he seems to be the only one to respond with a smile of his own. Perhaps David finds her to be beautiful. He doesn't touch her, of course. Or speak to her. The entire night. But, like a painting, or a television screen, she shows him something pretty.

It's as if they'd never kissed. And she's a mystery to him.

Back in the City, Hema runs into David at one of her intellectuals-only parties. He's out of place there, wearing his *Brooks Brothers*, blue, button-up shirt, gray slacks, and navy blue jacket. His girlfriend's the English-major type: short hair and painted lips. A turtleneck. She's the ticket in.

He acknowledges Hema and her red dress. "I haven't seen you in a long time."

"Since your mother's funeral." She stops. Corrects herself. "No. That party we had a few weeks afterwards. You and Rafi Uncle disappeared after that night..." She's holding onto her date's arm, hoping David will whisk her away to some dark corner, by themselves. And she hopes he'll kiss her there, taking off her red lipstick in the process.

This, of course, doesn't happen. David, after a three minute, seventeen second conversation with Hema, leaves with his date.

Chitra and Amal visit Hema, one Saturday morning. They call her fifteen minutes before buzzing her bell. Hema's in bed. She went to sleep around four in the morning. Thoughts of David seem to plague her quite a bit. All night, she thought of David. And she thought of how not a single man's kissed her since David. Perhaps she's intimidating with falcon eyes and red lips and black hair and dark skin.

The phone rings:

"Hello."

"Hema, what are you doing?" Chitra's shrillness isn't soothing in the morning.

"Nothing."

"We are coming to visit you."

"Now?"

"Yes. Do you need anything?"

Hema shakes from nervousness. "No. When will you be here?"

Chitra asks Amal how much longer it will be. "Say...fifteen, twenty minutes."

"You couldn't have told me last night?"

"Why? What are you doing?"

"Nothing. I'm just...still in bed."

"Why are you still in bed? Are you sick?" Chitra inhales. "Nevermind. Do you need anything?"

"No." Hema re-thinks. If she asks them to pick something up, it'll delay them.

"Actually, yes."

"What?"

“Mmm...” She thinks. “Bread...whole wheat...and milk, orange juice, oatmeal, bananas, toilet paper...”

“All your groceries?”

Hema laughs. “Kind of.”

“Well, we can go together to the store. That will better.”

Hema stops herself from groaning out loud. “Ok. Well, I have to brush my teeth and stuff. Call when you're here.” She doesn't wait for Chitra's response but hangs up.

Hema throws herself out of bed. Rushes to the kitchen. Pulls out the half-empty wine bottle out of the fridge. Grabs the wine opener from the drawer. Dashes back into the bedroom. Stuffs both things deep into her underwear drawer.

She also makes sure to hide her thongs under the bikini bottoms and hipsters.

Hema goes to the front door and puts away all the shoes that are out, cluttering the space in front of the door. Amal always lectures her for her shopping. *You do not have the money for this, Hema! You are not a rich man's daughter!*

Back in the bedroom, she throws open the closet door and takes all her short dresses and sleeveless blouses and pushes them to the back of the closet, behind her baggy sweaters. If Chitra knew her clothes showed her curves...

As Hema pats her face dry in the bathroom and soaks a cotton ball with toner, her front door calls her with a buzz.

She lets Chitra and Amal into the building.

She quickly moisturizes her face and applies eye cream (if Chitra knew all the money she spent on eye creams...). Hema drags a tee shirt over her head, wishing she didn't have to prepare for her parents in this way. As she pulls sweat pants on over lacy underwear, there's a knock.

They're here.

Hema looks quickly around the apartment, making sure everything's hidden. There's another knock on the door. From the other side, there's a voice calling to her, "Hema! We are here!"

She rushes to the door, her socked feet sliding on the wood. She flings the door open.

Chitra's first comment, as she steps in, is, "It smells like pee in the hallway."

"It's New York, Ma."

Amal, stepping in, asks, "Do I have to take off my shoes?"

"Do you take them off at home?" Hema asks, hand on hips.

"Yes."

“Well then, yes. And besides, I’m clean, Baba. You know that.” They’re both dressed sharply. Chitra wears a silk, red salwar kameez with black hand-stitched embroidery, black pumps, and golden bangles. And her usual chocolate-colored lipstick. And a big, black overcoat to cover it all up. Amal wears his decades-old grey overcoat, and under it, jeans (which he makes Chitra iron) and a gray, wool sweater. Chitra puts their coats on the sofa.

“Here, let me hang them up.” Hema takes them and hangs them in the closet.

Chitra pokes her head in, looking around, taking in Hema’s shoe collection.

“When did you buy those?” she asks, pointing to an electric blue pair of peep-toe heels.

“Oh...a while ago...I told you about them...” Hema goes to the kitchen. “You want chai?”

Amal answers, “Yes.”

“Good, I haven’t eaten, yet.”

Amal follows her to the kitchen. He stands at the doorway, watching Hema maneuver her body in the narrow space. “What do you do here, Hema, by yourself?”

“Hmm?” She pretends not to understand.

“Away from home...what do you do? I worry about you.”

“Nothing, Baba. Just school. Work. Studying...You know...You raised me all right. I’m not doing anything bad.”

Amal sighs. “If you say so, Hema.” He continues watching her. The tea kettle whistles on the stove. “You do not go to night clubs? You do not drink? Get drunk? Go out with men? Stay out late?”

Hema looks at him, surprised. “No, Baba.” This is a lie. She keeps her face straight. She hopes he can't tell her underarms have begun to sweat. She stirs milk into each of the tea cups, making sure the color of the tea's just right. “Ma,” she calls, “The tea's ready.” Hema sets the table with frozen waffles toasted warm, a jar of *Nutella*, a jug of water, three glasses, and the three cups of tea. “You guys want anything else?”

“No,” Chitra says, perusing the refrigerator. Hema freezes momentarily, thinking she left the wine bottle in the fridge door. Oh, she took it out. Hema breathes in relief. “You have nothing in here, Hema. What do you eat?”

Hema shrugs her shoulders. “Food.”

Amal jumps in to the conversation. “What...you eat out all the time?”

“No. I just eat a lot of salads.”

Chitra looks at Hema and frowns. “Leaves are not going to keep you healthy.”

Hema says nothing to this but sits down at the table and spreads *Nutella* over a waffle.

Chitra watches her and says, “You say you eat healthy, and yet you eat so much of that garbage!”

She takes a bite into the waffle and chew.

Chitra continues, “Do you sleep at night? Your skin looks so...haggard.”

Hema didn't put enough chocolate on the waffle.

Amal sips tea.

Chitra says, “You need to sleep and eat properly. Drink enough water. Dress properly.” Chitra stops. Sighs. Then begins to lecture again...

Hema takes another bite. Takes a sip of her tea. There isn't any point of continuing to listen to Chitra. If she does, she'll only feel that twinge of anger that'll travel up her arm and into her core, making her furious. No, she'd rather not listen. Hema finishes eating, "I'm going to go change. Then we can leave."

"Go where?" Amal asks.

"The grocery store," Chitra answers.

"What, we came here to do her grocery shopping?"

Hema goes into the bedroom, thinking of what to wear. Perhaps those old jeans that are one size too big and that plain, purple tee-shirt from high school. Neither of those articles are controversial. She slips her body into them and looks at her face in the dresser mirror. She doesn't have time to put on any makeup. And besides, Amal would chide her if she did.

Hema, fiddling with her purse, leaves her room to find Chitra peering into her laundry basket in the bathroom. Hema's eyes enlarge for a moment: she forgot to hide the black denim skirt on the top of the pile. Chitra says nothing about it. Instead, she asks, "Do you ever do your laundry?"

"I'm just waiting for enough of the same materials to collect to have full loads."

"You want me to do your laundry?"

"No, Ma." Hema walks past the bathroom and towards the front door. She pulls open the closet door and pulls out her brown boots. "Let's go."

There aren't any supermarkets close by. Hema lives in Queens. 43rd Street's lined with ethnic stores offering either falafel or spices and halal meat or Chinese grass, dried fish, and cheap chopsticks. They drive twenty minutes away to *Pathmark*—fifteen of those minutes are spent in traffic.

She doesn't find her particular brand of green tea, yogurt, or milk, but she makes do. Chitra constantly tries to meddle in what she picks throws into the cart. Amal navigates the shopping cart, walking slowly behind the two.

"Do you want any soup?" Chitra asks, holding up a can of *Campbell's* for Hema to see.

"No."

In the next aisle, Chitra points to vanilla wafers. "These are good for tea."

"You like them. I hate them."

Chitra's irritated. In the frozen section, she pulls out a packet of French fries.

"No. That's just excess carb. I don't need that."

"Hema, you are impossible! What will eat?"

"Ma, I'm not at home. I'm a grown woman. Let me decide what goes into my body. My *God!*"

Chitra closes her mouth. She puts her hands in her coat pockets and trails after Hema, eyeing all the items in the shopping cart.

At the cash register, Chitra stands, watching the monitor, making sure the cashier doesn't charge for anything twice. The total rings up to, "\$96.48."

Chitra asks, "Did you need to buy organic detergent?"

"It's gentler on my clothes." Amal motions to pull out his wallet. Hema cuts him off, "I've got this."

"You have money?" he asks.

"Yeah." She has her paychecks, her aid refunds, and his occasional checks. She's grateful that she won't have to carry all this back home herself. There's the car.

Back in the apartment, Hema puts the groceries away. Amal sits in the living room, watching television. Chitra's in Hema's bedroom, looking at the display of makeup on the dresser top. She calls out to Hema, "Why do you buy so much makeup? My God..."

Hema ignores her mother.

She calls out, "I can make lunch, if you guys want."

Chitra walks to the kitchen doorway and watches her daughter. She goes and sits at the table.

Hema turns and looks at her. "Well?"

"Yes, yes. Go ahead." She watches Hema. "Hema?"

"Hmm?" Hema asks, washing lettuce leaves at the sink. "Salad and grilled cheese good?"

“Yes.” Chitra twists the ring on her left hand. “Hema, I saw you had some dresses in the back of your closet. You wear clothes like that?”

Hema's back stiffens. Chitra can't see this through the shirt. Hema shrugs her shoulders. “They aren't bad, Ma.”

“Hema, they are so short. And tight. I did not raise you to wear things like that.”

“What's the difference between those and the blouses I wear with saris? Those show my stomach and back.” Hema turns around to look at her mother. “And besides, I wear tights with the dresses.”

“Chee, Hema.” Chitra shakes her head, disgusted.

Hema bites her bottom lips, suddenly she can't see her cutting board very clearly.

In a hushed tone, Chitra says, “If your father saw...He would go crazy, Hema.”

“Then don't tell him about it.” Her voice sounds much softer than she'd intended.

“Hema, what do you do here? Are you...you know...doing anything bad?”

Hema turns around. “Like what, *Ma*?”

“You know what I mean.”

“No, I don't.”

“Yes, you *do*.”

“Oh...” Hema grins. “You mean, am I seeing men?”

Chitra purses her lips.

“No, I'm not.”

“Oh, Hema...do not forget. This is only a short, temporary life. This is all for the after world. If you have too much fun here, you will suffer later—“

Hema cuts her off, "Save the lecture, Ma, please. I'm fine." Hema cuts the tomatoes, slamming the knife down hard on the cutting board. The cucumber slices come out uneven. The grilled cheese's too cheesy.

"How much cheese did you put in this, Hema?" Amal asks, rolling the bite to one side of his mouth.

"Ugh, sorry. I'm not a perfect cook." Hema watches Chitra pick at the lettuce with her fork, as if the leaves weren't washed properly. "Baba, what's with Rafi Uncle? How's he?"

Chitra glances up at Hema.

"Why the sudden question?" he asks.

"No reason...Just wondering." Hema sips water. The gulps it down. Gulps irritate Chitra. "I ran into David a while ago."

"Really?" Chitra asks. "You did not tell us before."

"I must've forgotten...But yeah, I ran into David."

"Where?" Amal asks.

Hema can't tell them she ran into David at a party. "Oh, you know...just in the city."

"How is he?" Amal asks. Hema knows he's fond of David.

"He looked all right."

"You stay away from him, Hema," Chitra says.

"Why?" Chitra wants to control every part of her life! Hema struggles to maintain her temper.

"You know why..."

Amal adds, "Yes, you should stay away from him. He was...raised differently...might get the wrong idea..."

"You guys have *got* to be kidding me, right? Right?"

Amal and Chitra look at Hema.

Hema sets her fork down quietly. "I've known David my *entire* life. We grew up together. And suddenly, he's a man out to get me?" Hema can feel her body about to shake. They're so...*fucking* controlling.

"Hema—" Amal begins.

"No, I don't want to talk about it. Forget I said anything."

"Hema—" he begins again.

"No."

Hema's having lunch with Joya, a girl from her class on Jane Austen. Hema's got grilled chicken with tomato, basil, and fresh mozzarella. And vegetable lentil soup. And lemonade, no ice, please. *I've got sensitive teeth*. She plans on leaving a bite and a half left of the sandwich. Near the end, between the sandwich and the soup, it'll be damned near impossible to finish both. Hema feels if she eats it all, her stomach will grow over the edge of her waistband.

Joya watches Hema for a moment. “You don’t eat enough. Ever.” Then she adds, “I’m surprised you even suggested grabbing food...Skinny bitch.”

Hema laughs. “Shut up.”

Joya’s tall, brown hair, Indian eyes—like Hema—with full lips, light skin, and a slim figure; she’s wearing colorful clothes—an electric blue trench coat—as opposed to Hema’s black. They sit at a table outside. “Bad idea sitting outside, Hema,” Joya complains.

“Fuck you. It’s crowded inside.”

“Still cold.” At the corner of the street, they see a desi transgender leaning against a phone booth. Joya tilts her chin towards her. “Hey, look, a hijra.”

Hema snorts. “Cross dresser.” She reaches for her lemonade. “I would just *die* if my shoulders were that broad.”

“Shallow bitch.” Joya laughs. She shakes a comma of hair out of her right eye.

Hema watches the hijra. Taking in his over-sized orange sweatshirt and black trousers (women’s). and black kitten heel pumps. He holds a black tote, pressed against his flat chest. Hema imagines him to have tears and smeared mascara running down his cheeks. He’d have to be homeless, too. “I want to find myself a really rich guy.”

“Gold digger.”

“Fuck you. I’ll have him help me start a business. A little book store with a tea room or something on the side.”

“*So* trendy.”

“Fuck you. That way, I won’t just be some pussycat waiting to be fucked every night.”

“Great rationale. Fucking bitch. You’re so crude.” Joya laughs. On her plate, there’s left a lonely leaf of spinach. “We swear so fucking much all the time.”

“Fuck.” Hema laughs and looks over at the hijra. She’s still there, leaning against the phone booth. Hema imagines her standing there, distraught and alone, just having been dumped by her latest boyfriend. Poor hijra. No money, no home, no friends. “Hey, Joya, you think he needs some money...for a phone call?”

Joya furrows her well-shaped eyebrows. “Who?”

Hema nods her head towards the hijra.

Joya lets out a laugh. “Suddenly you’re so charitable.”

Hema leaves a nice tip. She always does. She always imagines what it’d be like to be the waitress herself.

Hema and Joya are in Hema's apartment. It's Saturday night, past nine o' clock.

"Hema, I thought you said you were *ready*..." Joya says, standing, hands on her hips, watching her. Joya's wearing a blue dress and blue eye shadow. She's straightened her hair.

Hema doesn't tell her the eye shadow's too much. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I just need to make sure my mascara's all right." Hema's leaning into the mirror hanging from her bedroom's closet door. She's applying mascara carefully, making sure none of the lashes clump together. She's wearing her little black dress tonight. "What do you think of my LBD?"

Joya laughs. She sounds haughty. "LBD?" She asks. "Oh...right...black dress...looks good."

Hema looks away from the mirror and does a quick little dance. "I look good, don't I?" Her hair's pulled back in a bun, the bangs and her big, dark eyes on display. The dress leaves something to the imagination—short, snug, sleeved, with a plunging back. Hema's admiring herself in the mirror. "My legs look good, don't they?"

"Yes. Yes. Everything looks great. Let's *go*." A phone rings. Hema's body straightens. She turns around and looks on the bed. Her cell phone's lit up. "Let's *go*, Hema. Forget the call."

Hema walks to the bed and looks at the phone. "My parents."

"Call them *tomorrow*." Joya tucks her hair behind her ears. "Please...I wanna go *out*."

"A few more minutes, please. I have to answer this." Hema looks at Joya. "Please. You know how they are."

“Ugh. Fine Whatever. I'll be in the living room.”

Hema hears Joya's heels clack down the hallway and into the living room. The television comes to life. She can hear laughter from it seep down the hallway and into the bedroom. Hema shuts the door and looks down at her phone. Missed call. They didn't leave a voicemail. She calls her parents' house phone.

“Hello?” Amal answers.

“Baba...you called?” She sits down on the edge of her dress, looking at her bare thighs. Her dress's slid up.

“Yeah, where are you?” He puts the phone on speaker. She can hear the buzz in the background.

“In my apartment. I was just using the bathroom.”

“Oh...What are you doing tonight?”

“Nothing. Probably just going to watch television.”

Chitra cuts in, “Do you want us to come?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I'm busy. I have stuff to do.”

Amal asks, “Then why did you not come home? We would not have bothered you.”

“Baba, I never get anything done when I'm at home. I need to do my stuff here..”

Chitra sighs. “Have you eaten?”

“Yes.”

“What did you eat?”

“Ma, I’m not home anymore. You don’t need to babysit me. Actually, you need to *stop* babysitting me.”

“I only wanted to know if you ate.”

“Well, it’s irritating. You’re so nosy about everything. I’m an *adult*.”

Here, Amal cuts in. “Hema, stop trying to be so *American*.”

Hema lets out a groan. “Oh. My. God. I’m not trying to be anything but an *adult*.”

“Well, good Benagli girls, no matter their age, still respect their parents.” Chitra asks. “Your father and I are not like this.”

“Yeah...well...I’m not you, am I?” She sighs.

“I do not understand...” Chitra begins.

Hema cuts her off. “Yeah, me neither.” She inhales. “I gotta go.”

“Why? What do you have to do?” Chitra asks.

“Nothing. I just don’t feel like talking to you anymore.”

Amal sounds stern, saying, “Hema, be good.”

“Ok, Baba. Bye.”

Chitra has to say one more thing. “Call in the morning, when you wake up!”

“Khodafez.” Hema takes the phone away from her ear and hits the “End” button.

She makes sure to stifle the urge to allow her limbs to tremble in fury. She throws the bedroom door open, relishing in that gust the door makes when swung open. She stomps to the living room, indulging in scuffing the wooden floor with her heels.

Joya turns around. “Damn. Do you have to be so loud?”

Hema glares at her. “I need a drink.”

“What happened?”

“You don't want to know.”

“Sure I do.”

“Stop lying.” Hema pulls out her black coat from the closet.

Joya begins to put her arms in her brown coat. “Caught me...but really...that bad?”

“They're insane.” Hema checks herself one last time in the mirror next to the front door. “They're so...over-protective...crazy...insane...” Hema lets out a shriek. “Let's get smashed.”

“Bitch, please. You never get smashed...something about alcohol being bad for your skin...” Joya laughs. “Don't forget your keys.”

“Right.” Hema stops to the kitchen table and grabs her purse, clutching it tight to herself. That's being overprotective.

Hema, Joya, and a two other friends—Phoebe and Alaa—meet at the bar. Tonight, they're celebrating graduation. Sitting between Joya and red-headed Phoebe, Hema re-plays her graduation day in her mind. Amal and Chitra had come to it. They chided her on the dress she wore: Chitra vocally, Amal silently. Chitra had said, “Why is it so short?” Amal had pursed his lips. After the ceremony, Chitra had asked, “You are coming home, now, right?” When Hema shook her head, Amal had pursed his lips again.

“Why not?” Chitra’s voice was about three notches higher than her usual tone. “My lease isn’t over, Ma. And, I’m trying to find a job here...or get into graduate school.” Chitra had eyed her dress, one more time, disapprovingly. “I do not know what you are doing, Hema.”

The dress had been knee-length with three-quarter sleeves.

Joya jabs her in the ribs, pulling Hema out of her reverie. “Hey, you haven’t even touched your Garden martini. Finally realizing cucumber shouldn’t be in a drink?” Joya laughs. She’s had three cocktails so far and is on her third. Hema’s been pacing herself. This is her first one; though, she’s had two glasses of water, already. “Stop drinking so much water!”

“Got to stay hydrated.”

Joya drapes an arm around Hema’s shoulders. “You and your bullshit convictions. You won’t have a hangover tomorrow morning ‘cause you aren’t drinking tonight.”

Hema smiles. She finishes the martini all at once.

Joya whistles. “All you needed was some goading.”

Hema makes a face. “That was a strong martini.”

Phoebe leans in. “The waiter must think you’re cute. Probably told the bartender to make it stiff.” So, Phoebe’s been listening to the conversation.

Hema’s eyes widen. She grabs her empty martini glass and raises it in the air. “I’ve got a toast.”

Alaa laughs. “Here we go! The night’s about to start.”

Hema chuckles. "All right. All right. Let's get drunk!" The glasses clink. Hema realizes her glass's empty. She makes eye contact with the waiter. He comes over to the table. "Could I have a lychee martini, please?"

As soon as he leaves, Alaa comments, "You always have the weirdest drinks."

Hema shrugs her shoulders. "It's good. Try it."

Alaa shakes her curls out of her face. "I'd just like to say that I was named after Aladdin. And my name means *the height of faith*."

"You're an atheist," Phoebe laughs.

"Exactly," Alaa says.

Joya whispers to Hema, "This is going to be a good night."

Hema forgets her parents' voices. She takes a sip of her drink. It's much easier for the vodka to slide down her throat.

Hema gets up to go the bathroom. She doesn't need a girlfriend to go with her. It's time to see how drunk she looks. On her way to the bathroom, the waiter winks at her. She feels she should be flattered; she isn't. She's revolted, only able to focus on his gauged ear piercings.

She shudders.

Hema makes sure, as she walks past him, to strut past him. She knows she has a gorgeous gait. There's someone in the bathroom. She has to wait. Three minutes, eighteen seconds later, an overweight blonde with amazing earrings walks out. Hema smiles at her. At least the woman has good taste in jewelry, though she should lay off the crab cakes when drinking. Hema smiles to herself, she *does* have a sense of humor, after all.

In the mirror, she notices her right eye's lashes aren't as well done as her left eye's lashes. For some reason, she can never do her right eye's makeup as flawlessly as her left's eyes. Joya always laughs at her when she complains about this. *No one but you would notice something like that. Crazy!* Hema exhales through her mouth, heavily. It takes so much effort to focus on her face. No matter how much she's ever drunk, she's always been able to fix her makeup. She's talented like this.

Hema does a quick little dance, happy about her skills.

She leans in close to the mirror, making sure there isn't any water on the sink's edge. She doesn't want to ruin her dress. Her lips are uneven...the lip line isn't definite.

Ugh.

She isn't perfect.

No one is, of course. Some are just more air-brushed than others.

There's a knock on the door.

"Just a minute," she calls out.

Hema's glad she wore the black, lace panties tonight. Good choice. They make her feel vampy.

On the way back to the table, she notices the back of a blond-haired man. He's sitting at the bar, talking to some other man. He reminds her of David.

She strides back to the table and slips into her chair.

"What the hell were you doing in there?" Joya asks.

"Checking my make up." Hema raises an eyebrow. The girls ordered her another martini. "I haven't had this much to drink in forever..."

"You never need to check your make up. It's always flawless," Alaa comments.

"My lips are uneven. And my eyes are two different shapes."

"Only you would notice that," Phoebe says, tugging at few strands in her ponytail.

Hema's angled her chair so that she can look at the man at the bar. Still, she can only see the back of his head. If only she could catch a frame of his profile..."Girls, it's getting late. I should start heading ba—"

Alaa cuts her off. "Hell no! You always do this...Always the first one to bail. What's the rush?"

Joya answers for her. "You know Hema. She has to go to the gym in the morning. Call mommy and daddy. Get her beauty sleep. Blah. Blah. Blah"

"Not in that specific order, of course," Hema corrects. The blond turns. She sees his profile. It *is* David. "Oh my..." She can't look away.

“What? What?” Alaa follows Hema’s gaze. “*Heeeey*, there’s a cutie. I’m surprised no one sent us any free drinks.”

“This isn’t a movie,” Joya says drily. “And besides, we look a bit young for this crowd.”

“Bull shit,” Phoebe says.

“Guys, I know him,” Hema says, still looking at David.

“Who? The blond?” Phoebe asks.

Hema nods affirmation.

“Introduce me to him,” Phoebe says, finishing her drink.

Hema looks at her. “What?”

“Well, with your parents...no point in wasting a cute guy...you can’t go anywhere with him.”

“I’ll have you know, his dad’s Bengali.”

“Really?” Joya asks, leaning in, as if discussing some conspiracy theory. Hema feels as if she’s caving in on her, “Doesn’t look like it.”

“Yeah...well...I would know...our parents were friends.” Hema takes a sip of her drink. “I’ll be right back.”

Phoebe rolls her eyes. “Oh lord, you’re ditching us for a man.”

“No...”

“Just go.” Phoebe rolls her eyes.

Hema walks straight up to him. Doesn't give herself time to think about what she's doing. She taps him on the shoulder. "David?"

He turns around. Looks at her for a moment. Then he cranes his neck. Recognition. "Hema?"

Hema stabilizes herself in her high heels. She smiles. She nods. "Yep."

"What...what're you going here?"

She puts her hands in the air, relinquishing some secret. "Getting a drink."

He laughs. Then remembers his friend sitting to his right. "Hema, this is my friend Josh. Josh...this is...a friend...from back in the day."

"Nice to meet you." Brunette. Clean-cut hair. Bland clothing. Nothing impressive.

He isn't revolting. Hema shakes hands with him. "Hi."

"David, I should be heading out...Got some stuff tomorrow morning...It's getting late..."

David laughs. "All right, man. See you later."

The brunette smiles at Hema. Then leaves.

How convenient. She now has a place to sit.

David motions for her to take the seat.

She slips on to the chair. Her feet dangle. She suddenly feels thirteen again. She waits for David to insult her.

"You look...amazing," he says.

Hema's neck shoots forward, pushing her ear closer to his mouth. "What?"

He laughs. Looks to the bartender and says, "Another beer for me, please." He looks to Hema. "Drink?"

"Just water, please," she says to the bartender.

"I said you look amazing."

She makes a face. "How much have you had to drink?"

He laughs. "You know, you still have an accent. Not as obvious as before. But it's still there...when you speak slowly...it comes out. Remember?"

"Shut up." She leans against the bar, one shoulder crushing in on the other, the weight unbalanced, pressing her breasts together. Closer. To hear him better.

The bartender leaves a beer in front of David and a glass of water in front of her.

Hema hopes her friends aren't watching them. She leans on the bar more relaxed, arching her back. It feels good—stretching like that.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he asks, handling the bottle.

"Like I said, grabbing a drink...or...a few drinks." She laughs behind her hand.

"When'd you start drinking?"

"When I left my parents' house."

David nods his head in understanding. "When's the last time I saw you?"

Hema laughs. "A while ago...that party...you were there with some girl...the one with short hair..."

"Right...right...I remember." He looks at her. "Hmm...been a while."

"Why don't we stay in touch...ever? How's Rafi Uncle?" She sips her water through the straw. She can't mess her lipstick.

"You still say it wrong...you're supposed to say 'Uncle' before 'Rafi'..."

“What?”

“You invert the words...you say it wrong.”

“You’re a jackass.” Hema glares at him.

David begins to laugh.

Hema relaxes her shoulders. “Why do we always lose touch?”

David shrugs his shoulders. “I never got your number. And Dad’s pretty much disappeared from everyone’s life...you know...since Mom...”

Hema understands. “Right...right.” She looks over David’s shoulder and makes a face.

David looks to his left. There’s a man staring at Hema. When David raises an eyebrow at him, the man looks away. David turns back to Hema. “Let’s take a walk or something?”

Hema pauses to think. She looks back at her friends. They’re laughing. “One sec...” She walks over to them. “Guys...would you hate me if...”

“Get out of here,” Alaa says, not letting her finish her question. “It’s time you started playing around.”

Phoebe and Joya both laugh. The girls have been drinking while Hema’s been away.

“Traitor!” Phoebe calls out, in between laughs, as Hema starts to walk back to David. She calls out one last time, “Have fun...bitch!”

She laughs. Stands next to him. “Let’s go.” She slips on her coat.

He watches her do this.

Outside, they turn on to an empty side street. Hema listens to her heels on the cement walkway.

She's been so good with all the vodka this long. It gets to her now. Hema teeters in her shoes. She holds out her hands—like a woman walking a rope—and walks carefully.

David sees this and grins. “You look so dumb.”

“Shut up.”

He grabs her wrist. “This is a better alternative.”

She moves his hand to her hand and twines her fingers with his. “Don't hold me like that.”

“Too aggressive?”

“Where are we going?” Her grasp on his hand tightens.

He shrugs his shoulders. “You'll see.” He clenches her harder.

“Come on...tell me...” She tightens her grasp on his hand some more.

“I don't know.” His hold loosens some.

“Are you drunk?” She loosens her hold a little.

“No. Are you?” Their hands are comfortably cradles in one another's.

“Liar.”

She looks at him and crinkles her nose.

“Me too.”

“You're a liar?”

“Yeah.”

“So you're drunk?”

"A little."

They continue walking. Hema's hand slowly slips out of his. "Tell me...how're you...what've you been up to...let's...you know catch up..."

"You want me to tell you about...what...the last decade...?"

"Something like that."

He laughs, his mouth open.

"You look like a polar bear when you do that."

"You sound like a drunk."

Hema opens her mouth, offended. Then shuts it. "Whatever."

They stop in the middle of the sidewalk. David looks at her. "Let's go to my place?"

Hema looks at him. "No."

"Ouch."

"I'm not some girl you just picked up."

"Yeah, I know. You're a girl I've known for...like...my whole life."

"Oh...you meant like...*that*."

"Yeah, stupid."

"Ok, good. 'Cause I won't have sex with you."

"I don't want to have sex with you."

Hema lets out a little sound of surprise. "Are you crazy? Have you *seen* me?"

"And?"

"I'm hot."

"Hot-ness is subjective."

“Asshole.”

“I live close. We can walk.”

Hema's sitting on David's bed. He's rifling through boxes on his closet floor. “I can't find it.” His voice sounds muffled. He's referring to a picture of Hema from when she was twelve. Her nose was too large for her face at that age.

“I don't want to see it.”

“Yeah...but I do...I thought I had it in one of these old photo albums...”

“Where'd you even get it?” She's lying on his bed, feet planted on the ground. She's kicked off her shoes.

“Mom...I took all her albums and videos and shit when Dad moved out of the old house.”

“He never sold it, right?”

“What?...the house?...no.”

Hema sits upright and looks at him squatting inside the closet. “Will you get out of there, please? I really, *really* don't want to see this picture.”

“But you look *so* funny.”

“Exactly. Those were the awkward years. I don't want to think about them.”

David sighs. Gets out of the closet. Stands up. And looks at her. He puts his hands on his hips and just looks.

She laughs.

“What?”

“You just look undone without shoes.”

He wiggles his toes.

She nods her head. “Should’ve worn black socks.”

He grins, looking down at his feet. “What? Red socks not good enough for you?”

“Just doesn’t match the outfit.” She grins. Then bites her bottom lip.

“I didn’t think anyone would see. I was wearing boots.”

“What if you brought a girl home?”

“I wasn’t planning on it.”

“Brought me back...”

Hema walks to the kitchen and opens the refrigerator. David follows her there.

“You know, you aren’t as...goddess-like without those heels on your feet.”

Hema furrows her brows. Pulls her head out of the refrigerator. “Excuse me?”

“You look like a nice girl...like this.” He looks down at her feet.

She looks back into the refrigerator. “No orange juice?”

At work, the next morning, Hema sits behind the counter, looking at her nails, checking for any chips in the polish. Or for cuticles showing through the paint.

Her nails are perfect. This is just a way to stay busy. And to avoid thinking of David.

He'd driven her home. It was very close to four in the morning by then. They'd gone back to his bedroom. Sat on the floor. Near the edge of the bed. She'd laid her head on the bed's side and watched him as he'd talked to her. The way his mouth moved when he said certain words. Like "you." And "young." His mouth made such distinct shapes, the lips moving in different directions. Everything about him was so controlled, so constrained. Except for his mouth. It seemed to try to stretch in every which way when throwing words out there for her to catch on to and stow away in her mind. It was like...the words were trying to escape his...restraint.

Hema smiles to herself. There are no customers in the shop. The manager hasn't come in yet. She thinks he won't today. Sundays he likes to leave her alone, allowing for the few customers that stop by to be her problem.

At one point in the night, she couldn't focus on the meaning of his words. Simply taking in the form of his mouth. And the motion of his hands. And the curl of his hair. Hema was mesmerized by him. It'd been so long. So, so long. Hema sighed, audible. Her chest moved up, dramatically, then down. David, at the moment, stopped talking. He took his right hand and brushed her bangs away from her forehead. "You've had those bangs since...since Mom took you to get that haircut." She nodded. "My senior year of high school." He smiled. "I remember...your mom was so mad. Mom came home. Told me she seemed...crazy. You know, that quiet kind...that just explodes...then pretends nothing happened." Hema should've taken offence at this comment. But she understood David. Instead, she smiled. "I know. Sandra was...you know..."

A customer opens the door. The bell tings. Hema looks up to see an elderly couple walk in. She smiles at them. The woman smiles back. The man's oblivious to Hema's presence. She looks back down at her nails, this time also biting her bottom lip.

Chitra always chides Hema about this: if she continues biting her lips, they'll turn puffy and awfully textured. A very unattractive trait in a girl.

“You know, that first time I realized you were pretty...” David started to say. Hema cut him off, “You thought I was hideous until I took off my hat that one night and you saw the new hair style.” She tilted her head back and started to laugh, exposing her long neck to David. She straightened her head. “And don't even say I remind you of a goose when I laugh like that!” David laughed this time. “You still remember that?” “Are you kidding me? All those times you called me ugly...and said I sounded like a goose honking when I laugh...and made fun of my neck...which thank *God* I grew into...and when you used to make fun of my nose...and...” David interrupted her, “Ok...I get it. I remember. I was mean. But really...that night...I don't know why, but everything sorta...fell into place.” Hema looked down at her lap, then back at him. She'll look him in the face. “Yeah, that's the night you kissed me. Remember?”

Hema shudders, thinking of how stupid and pathetic she must've sounded ...*that's the night you kissed me. Remember?* She shudders. She must've sounded so...she must've sounded...like...as if...as if she *cherished* that moment so much. As if no one else's kissed her since then.

All day, Hema sits at the counter (occasionally getting up to check on a book or to fix a display or to get something from the back) and replays the moment when she brought up the kiss.

He hadn't kissed her, then. He should've kissed her. Right there. Sitting on the floor. To let her know he still wanted her. He still thought she was beautiful. But he hadn't. *Hadn't*. He'd kept pushing her bangs off her forehead. He'd played with her right ear lobe. He'd run his finger pads across the tips of her hair. He felt...soft to her...and quiet...intrigued by her...wanting to explore her...touching her here. There. She felt something in her bones. But she knew he wasn't following the script she'd dreamt of. And that was where the disappointment was real.

Hema reminds herself to breathe in deeply, to breathe out heavily. She tells herself to relax. To not let this bother her.

David had almost forgotten to ask her for her number when he dropped her off at her apartment.

At night, while preparing dinner for herself, Hema hears her phone ring. *Mom*. Hema shakes her head. She doesn't want to answer. If she didn't answer...she has to.

"Hello."

"Hema?"

"Yes, Ma."

"You have not called all day."

"I've been busy."

"With what?"

"Work." Hema's sure she's steamed the vegetable for too long, they look limp, colorless, and devoid of any flavor. She clenches her teeth, relishing in the pressure she puts on them.

"You cannot even call your own mother? What do you do all day? What about your lunch break?"

Hema sighs. "Sorry. Ok? Sorry. I'm just tired."

"From what? What makes you so tired? What have you been doing?"

Perhaps, if Hema lived at home, she wouldn't have to suffer this interrogation. Of course, if she lived at home, she wouldn't have the chance to go out to come home and be interrogated. "I don't know, Ma. I work...a lot. The gym. Trying to figure out stuff about grad school. Or maybe a real job. I—"

Chitra cuts in. "You should come home. From here, you can look for a real job. Thank God you are thinking about a career!"

"Where's Baba?"

"He is still at work."

"This late?"

"He works late these days. Says we need the extra cash."

She feels a twinge of guilt. The extra money...because of her. Hema isn't really as independent as she likes to think. She still needs the occasional check from her father to buy groceries or to do laundry or to buy those shoes she's been eyeing for seven weeks straight. Hema shudders. There's so much to fix about herself before she can be her own woman. "I want to order a subscription to *Vogue India*."

"You already have the American one, don't you?"

"Yes, but—"

"You waste so much money, Hema."

Hema almost tells her mother she ran into David this weekend. Then stops. She can't tell her mother she was at a bar. She can't tell her mother she approached David in a little, black dress. She can't tell her mother she was in David's apartment, alone, until four in the morning. She can't tell her mother David drove her back in his almost new,

expensive, sports car. She can't tell her mother she—while looking out the window and watching the City blur passed her—imagined herself a part of his apartment. Hema sighs.

“What?”

“Nothing. I have to go.”

“Did you eat?”

“No.”

“Eat!”

“I'm about to. That's why I have to go.”

“Well, call me before going to sleep.”

“Yes, Ma.” Hema hangs up and misses her father and pokes at the steamed carrot sticking out on her plate. It all feels so horrible.

Hema's phone rings again.

This time she's sitting in the armchair, pretending not to watch television. But the book's lying on her lap, face down, upside down. Her hair's wet. She's just showered. She smells her own shampoo and smiles to herself.

Hema sighs.

The phone continues ringing. It should go to voicemail in two more rings.

But if it's her mother...

Hema gets up and picks the phone up from the coffee table. *David*. Her hand begins to tremble. Just a little. Her heart races. She stops herself. Then answers. "Hello?"

"Hey, it's me. What're you up to?"

Hema sits down back in the armchair. "Just..." She looks at the book. No use in lying. "Just watching television." He called...And the very next day..."You?"

"Just got off work..."

"Kind of late, don't you think?" She smiles into the phone.

"It is what it is."

"I thought you said your schedule's nice."

"For a fashion photographer...yes. Compare that to a nine-to-five job...and no."

"Oh."

"Yeah." David hems for a second. "What're the plans for tonight?"

"Hmm?" He can't possibly want to see her tonight. She isn't even dressed.

Pajamas and no make-up.

"What're you up to?"

"Nothing."

"Want to...you know...hang out?"

"Uh..." She might as well be honest. "I'm...David, I'm in *pajamas*."

"And?"

Hema's starts to scratch at the armchair's fabric. "Umm..." The dust collects under her nails.

David sounds stern. "Hema, I saw you when you had an over-sized nose and chicken legs. You're kidding me, right?"

Hema grins through the phone line.

"What?"

"You really want to see me that bad, huh?"

"Don't flatter yourself."

"Mmm..." Hema makes her decision. "All right. But you come over. I don't feel like fixing myself. And no way I'm going out like this."

David laughs. "I hope you aren't always done up."

"I'm not right now..."

"All right. All right. I'll be there in...twenty, thirty minutes..."

"K." Hema hangs up before David can say anything else.

Hell breaks loose in Hema's apartment. David's coming over. Oh Lord. She looks around the apartment. Everything seems tidy. And clean. Except for the bathroom sink. The white enamel doesn't seem white enough. She pours cleaner all over it and begins to scrub. She washes the soap away. Scrubs some more. Still, the enamel just doesn't seem clean enough. She spends a few more minutes, scrubbing, scrubbing, scrubbing. Perhaps the lighting's just too yellow.

Hema blows out the candles she'd had burning in the living room. She doesn't want to give David the idea that she's setting up a romantic ambience for them. She turns on the table lamps, still leaving the room dimly lit. But still brighter than before.

She rushes to the kitchen and checks the refrigerator. There's fruit. And raw vegetables. And leftover sushi (pieces from a California roll). Then there's orange juice, coconut water, and grapefruit juice. Milk. Yogurt. Whole wheat bread. Hummus. An unopened bottle of wine. Cheese (four kinds). In the freezer, there's some of her mother's curry (frozen for preservation in six different containers), packaged vegetables, ice cream (three kinds), and chicken breast.

Lord.

If he's hungry, she hasn't much for him to eat.

Of course, she *could* cook.

But, it *is* so late.

Hema goes to the bedroom. She looks at herself in the body-length mirror. She's not *that* bad, from the front. She turns to the side and checks her profile. It seems that she has a *pudge*...No, that's not right. She looks again. That was just her mind trying to trick her. She isn't pudgy. She goes to her dresser top and picks up her perfume bottle. Her signature smell. She almost sprays herself. Then stops. She smells too nice and clean. She

just can't ruin that. Hema puts the bottle back down on the dresser and walks out of the room shutting the door behind her.

Hema sits on the sofa and stares at the television, which isn't turned on. The black screen doesn't distract her from her nerves. She goes to the hallway mirror, next to the front door. She stares at her face. She isn't hideous in her pajamas. She sighs. All right.

The buzzer rings. He's here. She unlocks the main door for him. It should take him about half a minute to get to her door. Hema scans the living room. Everything seems fine. She rushes to the kitchen and fills the tea kettle with water, sets it on the stove, and puts the burner on medium heat.

There's a knock on the door.

She rushes to the door. Then stops. She shouldn't be this eager.

Hema puts her hand on the lock, slowly unlocks it, then pulls the door open.

"Hey."

David's holding a plastic bag. "I got Chinese."

Hema grins. "Come inside."

David steps in to the apartment. The first thing he does is slip his shoes off. Hema raises an eyebrow. "I remember...you were raised in a house where shoes were taken off at the door."

"I didn't say I was like that, though."

"I know you. You used to clean the house incessantly."

"As a girl."

"Who says that hasn't changed?" David slides his feet around on the wooden floor.

Hema smiles, biting her bottom lip.

"Exactly." David walks further into the room. "Nice place."

"It's not as nice as I'd like..." Hema remembers. "Oh, where did you park your car?" She's still standing at the door, hand still around the door knob.

"Just at a meter...took me long enough to find an empty spot. But I did it."

"Where though? In front of one of the buildings on this street? Or a side one?"

"One of the side streets."

"Oh, David...I really don't think you should leave your car there..."

"Hema, stop worrying so much...my God..."

Hema closes the door. "Ok...ok..." She begins to move toward the kitchen. "I'll get some tea for us."

"Stop." David follows after her.

Hema stops walking.

"Look. Relax. I know tea's supposed to be the first thing you give a guest. I'm not a guest. I'm David..."

"It's been so long...and it's rude not to..."

"You're kidding me, right? Sit down. Let's eat this food first." David peers into the kitchen. Then he walks into it and places the bag on the table.

“At least let me get the wine out.”

David laughs. “Ok. That’s acceptable.”

Hema sits on the living room. David sits across from her, tea mug in front of him on the coffee table. She says, “This is so weird.”

“What is?” He looks at her.

Hema’s uncomfortable with his staring. “Don’t stare at me like that.”

“Why not? Don’t you remember all the times you’d sit there and stare at me?”

“I did not!”

“Yes you did.”

“I didn’t stare.” Hema doesn’t look away from his face.

“Anyways...what’s weird? Me looking at you?”

Hema looks away. “Yes...well...no...I didn’t mean that.”

“Then what?”

“I mean...” She fiddles with the empty mug in her hand. “All of a sudden...we’re just...so normal with each other...shouldn’t it feel more...weird?”

“No, why should it?” He leans, the coffee table keeping him away from her.

“Well...I mean...we just met—“

David cuts her off. “We did not just meet.”

“Well...yes, I know. But I mean, it's been so long...*years*...and you're being...so nice to me...you know?”

David nods his head. “I get it.” He gets up and walks over to her. She's leaning against the sofa. He sits down next to her.

Hema's careful not to bump knees with David.

He doesn't touch her. “You're alone now...I can be free with you...”

Hema catches on. “I get it...no parents.”

“Exactly. You might not know it, but your father can be extremely intimidating.”

“Baba?” Hema asks, making a face. “I'd think Ma would be the scary one.”

David smirks. “Your mother's harmless. It's your father...I could always tell he disapproved of me when you'd come and watch me play video games in the basement?”

This is bewildering to Hema. “You think? He's always said he likes you.”

“He may like me. But he doesn't like *me* in relation to *you*.”

“Oh...”

“Yeah.”

Hema cautiously lays her head on David's shoulder. He doesn't tense up under her. She relaxes. “This is normal?”

“I don't know.”

Again, at work, Hema tries to distract herself, so as not to think about David and the night before. She calls Joya. "Yo."

"What's up?"

"Lunch?"

"When?"

"Noon?" Hema plays with a pair of scissors on the counter. She imagines cutting all of David's curls with it.

"Can't. I can't take my lunch before one."

"All right. How about one?"

"That's fine. I'll stop by the shop?"

"K." Hema hangs up and looks at the time. One hour and thirteen minutes until lunch. She sighs. She's not hungry. Joya works at Baruch College's Financial Aid office. She got the job right after graduation. Lucky bitch.

Hema reorganizes the Jane Austen shelf, taking the books out of alphabetical order and putting them in order of which novel she likes best.

Fifty-seven minutes until lunch.

She re-orders the books again. This time putting them in order of how she first read them.

Fifty-one minutes left.

Hema fingers the spines of the books, shutting her eyes, feeling for the stories within the bindings.

She opens her eyes. Forty minutes.

She sighs.

Hema decides she won't have sex with David.

Joya walks in through the door. The bell clangs after her. "Hey!"

"Hey. Let me punch out real quick." Hema's snapped out of her reveries. She feels caught.

"Where do you want to eat?"

"Mmm...I'm not that hungry. You pick."

"You really need to get a steady diet." Joya pauses. Looks at her phone. "All right...how about Chinese?"

"If you want..."

"Chinese it is."

"I'm gonna smell like it, aren't I?"

"Shut up."

Hema follows Joya out of the store. Then stops and calls out to her boss. "Fred, I'm going to lunch!"

From the back, he yells, "You got one hour, girlie!"

"All right."

Hema sits on the blue, plastic chair, uncomfortable and fidgeting.

“Will you knock it off?” Joya snaps, fork in mid-air, a piece of beef hanging before her mouth.

“What? I’m not doing anything.”

“What is the matter with you?”

“Nothing.”

“Usually you devour Chinese food, even when you say you aren’t hungry... You’re not even asking to sample my plate...”

Hema shrugs her shoulders, chin in hand. She looks down at her sad cup of green tea. “The tea just doesn’t taste that good.”

Joya snorts.

Hema looks at the V-neck of her blouse. Joya’s got wonderful breasts. Hema almost wishes hers were as...voluptuous.

“What?”

Hema shrugs again. “Your boobs look good today.”

Joya grins. “They always do.” She takes a bite. Chews. Then asks, “What? Is it your parents?”

“No. I’m not really upset.”

“Well...something’s on your mind. Fess up, bitch.”

Hema sighs. “Fine. I was with David last night.”

Joya furrows her eyebrows. Then realization dawns on her. “That guy from the bar...wait...you slept with him?”

“No. Not like that. We just hung out last night.”

“Hang on. This is the David who’s dad’s Bengali and mom’s white, right?”

“Yes.”

“And he’s the guy that kissed you...when you were...what...like seventeen?”

“Yeah.”

Joya takes another bite. “I don’t know how you’ve held out for so long...what’s it been...a few years...no action...” She finishes chewing. Then whistles.

Hema watches her.

Joya begins to talk again. Hema looks at Joya, directly in the eyes. David and she have known each other for years. They aren’t rushing things. They’re re-learning each other. Re-discovering each other. This is good. She shouldn’t be so afraid. Joya’s still talking. Hema watches her lips move. They are fast in motion. Hema interrupts her. “I mean, last night, he brought over Chinese food!”

Joya leans back and looks at Hema. “Is that a bad thing? You like Chinese.”

“I know. But I mean...he *remembered* that I always wanted to order Chinese food—take-out, delivery, which ever—and Ma would always say no. She didn’t like when we didn’t eat her food for meals. And so...you know, he was like ‘Thought you’d like some Chinese,’ and then he had that smirk on his face...like when were kids.”

“Hang on...a guy does something nice...remembers something you like...and that confuses you.”

“You don’t get it. We never liked each other as kids. I mean...I sort of did...but he was mean to me...”

“And then he kissed you—“

“He only kissed me ‘cause I got a haircut.”

Joya cracks her neck. "You're crazy. Just take it as it comes. If you dig him, you dig him."

"But I *can't*. Ma and Baba would..."

"You're not under their roof anymore. They can't know what you're up to. And besides, they can't possibly think they have control over your life, still."

Hema laughs. "Joya, my parents are nothing like yours."

"What? I thought you said your dad loves David."

"He does...but that doesn't mean he'd let me be with David. He's neither Muslim, nor Bengali."

"He's half."

"Ok. Fine. Maybe the Bengali part's not *that* huge of an issue. But the Muslim part...he'd...I don't know *what* he'd do...As for Ma...she'd probably burn me off the family tree..." Hema looks at the tea dregs at the bottom of her cup. They suddenly seem extremely depressing. "I can't...you know...date him...be with him."

Joya whistles. "No wonder you're so fucked up. Your parents...they fucked you up...I mean, damn...getting sand-blasted off the family tree's a little harsh..."

"I won't have sex with him, you know."

"That doesn't make shit any better, Hema."

Hema's twenty-three minutes late from lunch. The manager says nothing. He acknowledges her return.

"Sorry, Fred. I won't take a lunch tomorrow. Promise."

He shakes his head, the red hair on it catching glints of sunlight pouring in through the window. "I don't want you to starve...Thin enough already..."

Hema smiles. "You're a sweetheart, you know. You try to be so stern..." She makes a face. "But you're not."

"Don't try taking advantage."

"I won't!" She sits down behind the counter and looks out the window. Hema really does have a wonderful job. She does nothing but sit and look out the window. She's very much like a cat in this way.

Hema calls her mother on the way home. She walks, instead of taking the subway. This is a long walk, but she feels it's necessary.

"Hello?" Chitra answers.

"Hi, Ma." Hema's pace slows down as she's required to both walk and talk simultaneously.

"Hema..."

"What're you doing?"

"Nothing, just making dinner."

"Baba's not home, yet?"

"No. He should be home around seven thirty."

"Oh." She stops at an intersection. She feels the energies of people moving around her.

"You just got off work?"

"Yes."

"What are you going to eat?"

Hema shrugs her shoulders. Chitra can't see this. "I don't know...maybe just cereal or something."

"Hema! That is not enough food for you!" Chitra sounds outraged.

"Ma, I'm fine. I have to watch what I eat...I'm trying to stay fit."

"Being fit and looking like a starving skeleton are two different things...I do not understand why you exercise so much. That gym...you will look like the green hulk."

"I promise, I won't look like the green hulk. And... I don't need to get to work until ten o'clock. I can go to the gym in the morning. Come back. Shower. Then go to work."

"Most people your age—unless they have to—do not wake up at five o'clock in the morning, Hema."

Again, she shrugs her shoulders. "I don't mind."

"This girl!"

Hema debates telling her mother about David. But, she can't.

Chitra sighs over the phone. "Come home, Hema. You belong here, with us."

Hema's voice suddenly loses all vibrancy. "No."

"Why? What have we done wrong?"

"You haven't done anything wrong. We just don't...I can't...I can't live at home. You guys are too controlling. We don't agree...On how to live life..."

"What? What is it that you want that we cannot give you?"

"Ma...I can't even go out when I'm at home. I can't dress how I want. I can't do my makeup how I want."

"What? What do you wear? Those short dresses? You want to go out at night? With men? Late? Is this what you want?" Chitra pauses. "It is wrong, Hema! It is sinful! You are only here for a little bit. It is the afterlife you have to worry about."

"Ma, I'm not doing anything wrong. I'm living according to religion and its dictates how *I* interpret them to be."

"Hema...no..."

"Ma, I don't care what other people think. I know I'm not a bad person."

"Hema, without other people, you have no society. Where can you go if your own people reject you?"

"I don't need society, Ma...and society's more than just Bengalis and Muslims...if you only knew what some of the Muslim girls were like..." she sighs, "Nevermind...I need to feel free. Ok?" Hema's walking faster, keeping pace with her emotions. She's also speaking loudly, not caring that others can hear her.

"Do not say such things!"

"I'm not coming home, Ma. I'm not moving back."

“What? You want to make me and your father miserable? You want us to be sad?”

“No! But you need to understand I'm growing up.”

“Hema, you are thinking like an American girl. Bengali girls do not do this!”

“Ma...I *am* an American girl. Don't you understand?”

“So you are going to let go of all your roots?”

“No! I'm just asking you to let me be in control of myself. I'm not giving my culture up. I'm not refusing religion. I'm just saying let me interpret how...how I'll keep them in my life. My gosh! I just called to talk. And you just...you just piss me off.”

“Yes...well I make you angry when I tell you you are doing something wrong. If you want to keep doing as you please, perhaps you should not be my daughter anymore. You can burn in Hell on your own account. I want nothing to do with that!”

Hema laughs. “What...You're saying you'll disown me 'cause I want to make the decisions in my life?”

“No...I am saying you are being a bad...a difficult daughter.”

“I have to go, Ma.”

“See, you never want to talk.”

“I'll call later. Before bed. Bye.”

“Khodafez, Hema.”

Hema hangs up.

Hema stops walking in the middle of the sidewalk. She calls David.

“What’s up?”

“Where are you?” she asks, watching people rush past her.

“Work. What’s up?”

“When do you get off?”

David laughs. “Couldn’t get enough of me, huh?”

“Don’t flatter yourself.”

“I could get off work now?”

“Yes.”

“All right. I’ll get out. What do you want to do?”

Hema looks around. “Nothing.”

“What?”

“I just want to relax.”

“Ah...have you eaten?”

“No.”

“I’ll get take-out. My place or yours?”

“Get something healthy, please. I can’t eat garbage. And my place, please.”

Forty minutes later, Hema arrives at her apartment. As she's putting her coat away, there's a buzz. David's there. She lets him in and continues to situate herself. She puts the tea kettle on the stove. She takes off her sweater and pants, slips into a t-shirt and shorts. She unlatches the front door and goes into the bathroom, leaving the bathroom door ajar so as to see him come in.

David knocks on the door first. It slips open some. He lets himself in. "Hema?"

"I'm in the bathroom!" She's lathering her face with face wash.

He walks to the bathroom doorway. "One day you can't stand the thought of me seeing you without makeup. The next day, you're grooming yourself while I walk in." David leans in a little, as if to smell her soap. "By the way, I can't bring my car when I come over here. It's hard to find parking. Besides, I'll go broke just feeding the meters."

Hema laughs. "I have a shit ton of extra change. Need some?"

"Well, the meters are free after a little bit, right?"

"Oh...yeah...I always forget that." Hema towels her face dry. "But, I *do* have lots of spare change." She begins to put face cream on. "Oh, what'd you get?"

"Veggie pizza."

Hema scrunches her face. "Carbs?"

David looks at her. "You don't eat carbs?"

"I do...I just...you know...watch what I eat."

David looks her up and down, overtly. "You look fine."

Hema frowns. "Says the man who photographs fashion models all day." She walks towards the bedroom.

David follows her. "Just because I photograph them doesn't mean I'm attracted to them."

Hema, while fixing her hair, looks at David's reflection in the mirror. "What? Am I prettier than those models?" She squints her eyes. His hair looks too messy and long. If he'd let her trim the curls...or perhaps...if he'd just let her lop them off...

"You're a little aggressive today, aren't you?" David moves closer to her, looking into her reflection's eyes. He doesn't look away when she catches his gaze. There's something firm in the look. He isn't afraid of her. She feels a warmth grow in her abdomen and spread throughout her. She doesn't blush as it spreads to her ears and cheeks.

Hema's shoulders stay confident, as she finishes putting her hair in a ponytail. David reaches from behind and pushes her bangs away from her forehead. "Why do you do that?" She wonders what he'd do if she bit his hand right then.

"What?"

"The bangs...push them away."

He shrugs his shoulders. "I like seeing you without them sometimes... You look...Nicer without them."

"Nicer?"

David turns away and walks to the kitchen. Hema follows behind. "No. You *are* a nice girl."

She sighs dramatically. "Oh *Lord*. Just stop."

David picks up a wine bottle. "Where's your bottle opener?"

Hema opens the utensil drawer and hands it to him.

“Do your parents know you drink?”

“Of course not.” She hands him two glasses.

“Oh, there’s salad too, by the way.” He motions to the plastic container sitting on the table.

“I’m starved.”

“David?” Hema asks, sitting on the living room floor, looking at the television screen. They’re watching a documentary on the history of ice cream in the U.S.

“Hmm?” David’s biting into a pizza slice.

“Why didn’t we just cook dinner?”

He looks at her, chewing. He swallows. “Are you serious right now?”

“What? I’m just wondering...”

“Is this bothering you?”

“No...I’m just asking...I mean...”

“I know, I know. It’s always nicer to cook your own food. I don’t know. You said you wanted to relax.”

Hema sighs. “True, I wouldn’t have cooked anyways...probably would’ve just gone to sleep having eaten cereal or something.”

David looks at her funny. “What’s wrong?”

Hema sucks in her cheeks. "You know...just talked to Ma and all."

David understands. "I see. And what'd she say?" David finishes his pizza slices.

His legs stretched out, the plate lies on his thighs.

Hema scootches closer to him. Snuggles up to him. She moves his arm so she can be under it. Then she shrugs her shoulders. "You know...the same thing...be a good Bengali girl. Blah. Blah. Blah."

"And are you a good Bengali girl?"

"I think I'm a good woman."

David kisses the top of her head.

Hema's phone rings. She groans. "That's got to be her."

David lets her out from under his arm.

"Sorry. I *have* to answer."

"Mhmm." He takes a bit of pizza and turns down the television. Begins to pay attention to the narrator's voice.

"Hello, Ma."

"What are you doing?"

"I just ate." Hema looks at David. She reaches over and touches one of the curls above his left ear.

“What did you eat?”

“Pizza.” His hair strands are surprisingly smooth. Soft. This is unexpected of curly hair.

“Pizza? I thought you were worried about eating healthy.”

“I am... But it doesn't hurt to occasionally eat pizza.”

“You eat pizza, but when you come home, you refuse to eat rice.”

Hema sighs, moving her hands away from David's head. “I don't refuse to eat rice, Ma. I just don't want to eat it every day...not in the portions you give. Do you know how fat I'd get?”

“You would *not* get fat, Hema!”

“I don't feel like talking about this right now, Ma. Where's Baba?”

“I am right here, Hema.” Amal says. The phone's on speaker, as usual.

Hema wonders if they can hear David breathing next to her. “What're you doing?”

“Nothing, just in bed,” Amal says.

“Oh.”

“How is everything, Hema?”

“Fine, Baba.” Hema wants to hang up the phone. She wants to go back to David.

“Did you eat?”

“Yes, Baba.” He heard her tell her mother she ate pizza for dinner...

“What are you doing?”

“Just watching television, Baba.” There's a silence on the line. The three are all silent. Nothing to say. “Ok, well, I'm going to go.”

“Ok, Hema,” Amal says. “Be good.”

“Yes, Baba.”

Hema hits the red button on her phone. The call ends.

Hema chucks the phone on the sofa. Then goes back to David. This time, he lifts his arm and places her under it. She sighs.

“What’s up?”

“Nothing.”

They’re both watching the television. “How’re they?”

“Something’s always wrong with them.” She looks up at him.

He doesn’t look at her, but just rubs her arm with his hand.

She kisses his jaw. His chin.

David looks down at her. He smiles. Strokes her temple.

“This isn’t wrong, right?”

David’s patient with her. “Do you think so?”

“No.”

“Then it’s not.”

“Ma...Baba...”

David looks at her. “Your decision, Hema.”

“K. But go slow... ’cause... you know...” She won’t break eye contact.

“I got it.”

They’ve made it to Hema’s bed. A sharp intake of breath here. Another there. Intertwining of limbs. This is all unfamiliar. She sighs. He strokes the skin under her shirt. There seems to be an energy crackling throughout the room. She can see its blue coloring sparking along the edges and cracks of the room’s walls. Feels to be surfing under his finger tips. And into her skin’s pores. David plucks her body. Each pore. Like the strings on a sitar. She feels the notes sprinkle over her. Falling around her. This is bliss. A quick, short, “*Ah.*” He asks, “You sure?” She nods, *yes*. Perhaps with one swift motion... and flawless. But it isn’t swift. Or one motion. She’s tight. Unready to make room. Bangladesh and Islam and Chitra and Amal and society and fear and... some unknown tension...they create a boundary wall. She can see a sort of flag. Green and red. Staking claim over her body. She smiles. He kisses the smile. Paces himself. A little at a time. To prove to them all that he deserves her. That he’s her equal. David kisses her neck. Her earlobes. Whispers in her left ear. She doesn’t understand what he says. Focused so much on the sensation of his breath seeping into her body through the external ear. A little at a time. “There’s no rush.” She nods, *yes*. With the blinds open. And the street lights filtering in through screens and windows. Everything bathed in a

surreal tint. She feels the barriers soften. Relent. Invite him a little more with every time. “You good?” She nods, *yes*. Her cat eyes open, she bores into him, swerving around the curves of his grey irises. She looks in past his harshness. His scaly toughness. She knows: he wants what she wants. With her palms on his cheeks, he has to look at her. He has to keep his eyes open. “Hema...this...this...” He doesn’t finish his sentence. “*Ah.*” This is bliss.

Late at night, David gone, Hema sits on the sofa. The television set on mute. The blue light making it hard to see her eyes. Just like deep shadows. Hollows in her face. And her nose the only prominent feature. She’s just showered, wrapped in her white towel. She hasn’t gone through the post-shower process: brush teeth, lotion, face cream, eye cream (to slow down the aging process), leave-in conditioner for her hair. None of this has been done.

She’s got the old-fashioned phone sitting on her coffee table, receiver pressed to her right ear. “Ma?” (Pause.) “No. No, everything’s fine. I know it’s late.” (Pause.) “Just calling, we haven’t really talked.” (Pause.) “Yes, I know it’s my fault.” (Pause.) “No, I don’t want you to be miserable.” (Pause.) “I’m fine.” (Pause.) “No, I haven’t been up to anything bad.” (Pause.) “Here...is Baba there?” (Pause.) “Yes, I *do* want to talk to you.” (Pause.) “Yes, all right.” (Pause. Pause.) “Baba?” Her eyes are watering, but the tears

aren't falling. "Yes, I'm fine." (Pause.) "I'm still looking for a job." (Pause.) "How's work?" (Pause.) "They don't give you too hard a time, right?" She gives a little laugh. Her shoulders shake—so demonstrative. There's no one else in the room, besides the actors in the television. "I ran into David the other day." (Pause.) "Remember, Rafi Uncle's son." (Pause.) "He's fine. Looks the same." (Pause.) "No, I don't think he's married." (Pause.) "Yes, yes, I know. I'll stay away from him." (Pause.) "I don't know what Ma's problem with him is." (Pause. Pause.) "Ok, ok, I know. A Bengali Muslim. I know." (Pause.) "Fine, give it to her." (Pause. Pause.) She's biting on her bottom lip. She's chewing on it, almost mercilessly. "Ma, it's all right. Listen, I'm not seeing him." (Pause.) "No, I'm not doing anything with anyone." (Pause.) A few tears have managed to fall. She doesn't wipe them away. "Ma, stop. Please. I just called, wanted to see what you two were up to." (Pause.) "Yes, I know I'm going to come home this weekend." (Pause.) "Yes, I know. It's out of the question. I *have* to come home." (Pause.) "Yes, Ma. I know." (Pause. Pause. Pause.) "Ma?" (Pause.) "Can you teach me how to wear a sari by myself when I come home?" (Pause.) "I just want to know how." Her bottom lip's quivering. (Pause.) "I know it's late." (Pause.) "Yes." (Pause.) "Ok. Bye."

She sets the phone down in its cradle. She goes to bed. Her sheets are white. Quilt, too. The television's left on. She sinks deep into the bed. Wet hair sprawled across all four pillows. Her left arm's at an odd angle. She doesn't care. She's too tired. And David isn't next to her in bed. She feels he ought to be, now. Hema's naked under the towel, and the towel's unraveling (she tosses in her sleep, she has all her life).

Hema takes the train home. Amal offers to pick her up. She tells him the train will be easier. The train ride feels lonely. She wishes David were there. He'd offered to take her to Jersey. She'd declined. He can't take her home. Her parents would see them together, and they'd realize that there was something between the two of them. She sits in her seat and pulls her coat tighter around her and looks out the window. She leans her head against the window. Then moves her temple away from the glass. Who knows what else's been pressed against this surface. Hema runs through all the clothes she's wearing. Nothing risqué. She goes through all the clothes she's taking with her. Nothing risqué. Her parents shouldn't be upset with her. At least not because of her clothes.

Hema sighs.

If Sandra were alive and Rafi Uncle wasn't in that depression...things would be just like before and David and she could be alone in the basement for as long as they'd like...

Chitra's brown hair has streaks of gray running through it. Hema wants to ask why she hasn't kept up with dying her hair on time. Chitra's usually so immaculate in her appearance. Hema remembers—while sitting at the kitchen table—her twelfth birthday. Chitra, Amal, and she were going to dinner. She'd already gotten dressed—a red jumper,

white turtleneck, and black shoes—and so had Amal. He'd worn a gray suit with a white, dress shirt. They were waiting for Chitra. All in the master bedroom. Amal sat on the bed and watched Chitra. Hema stood behind her, both of them in front of the mirror. Hema could see her own reflection, but she could only see some of herself (the rest of her reflection was covered by Chitra's body). Chitra wore a plain, black, long-sleeved blouse and white sari. Hema watched her as she painted on that usual chocolate-colored lipstick (it clashed with the black blouse). Chitra was wrapped in a bun and newly dyed; she'd gotten gray strands early in life. Her eyes were this soft brown, but Hema never really noticed this because Chitra's painted lips that were too distracting. Chitra was beautiful: beautiful like models on the runway. "Get me a tissue, will you?" she'd asked Hema, leaning into the mirror, checking to see if her eyelashes were all separate. When Hema came back from the bathroom with the tissue, she found Chitra sitting on the bed, next to Amal (he'd been watching her), putting on her shoes. Neither of them noticed Hema standing in the doorway. Chitra let out a sigh of frustration. "My feet would never hurt if I didn't wear these heels." "Don't wear them then," Amal said. "Oh, please, I'm too short not to. If I were a little bit taller..." she didn't finish her sentence. "But if it hurts you—" Amal began. Chitra looked up at the doorway and saw Hema standing there. "Well hurry up, bring it to me." Hema shudders, thinking of that moment. *Beauty is pain.* Hema laughs at herself. She tries so hard to be beautiful. And David's never said she's beautiful. It all feels very futile.

Amal's more resigned. He reads and watches the news most of the time. Hema doesn't talk to him. Or to Chitra. She can't find any moment when she doesn't feel some sort of spite towards them. Even Amal.

Hema's in the family room. She's lying on the sofa, in her pajamas, having just showered. She's sleepy; her eyelids droop heavily over her eyes. Cartoons play on the television screen. She's muted the volume. David laughs whenever she watches cartoons.

Amal comes in, sits on the edge of the sofa, near Hema's head and looks down at her. "Tired?"

"Yeah," Hema says, looking up at him.

He runs his hand over her forehead, pushing her bangs back. "How are you?"

"Fine. Why?"

"I worry about you." Amal's hand rests on her forehead. Amal watches the cartoon. Then turns to her. His attention divided. "You scare me."

"I'm fine, Baba."

"I want to tell you about something, Hema."

"What?" She shifts on the sofa so she's leaning up a little bit.

Amal moves his hand away. "Remember, you have no obligation to do this at all."

"Ok. What's this about?" Hema can sense Amal's apprehension.

"A marriage proposal came in the other day for you. A few have come in before, but I have never given them importance until now."

Hema pauses. Reminds herself that adults remain calm in situations such as these.

"Why not?"

"I did not think you would be ready to deal with something like that, then."

"What're you saying?"

"Hema, listen, I can *sense* something is different. You don't need to tell me what. But I am your father. You are a physical part of me. I can sense things in you, about you. You know?" Amal's playing with a curl on Hema's head. He's gazing at her fondly.

"Fine. Yeah. Nothing's different, though." She doesn't swat his hand away. She won't look at him. "What about grad school? What about making my own career?"

"Hema, all that does not have to stop because of marriage. You cannot put all other aspects of life on hold while you focus on one specific part...Anyways, the other day, someone brought a proposal. I told them I would let them know in a few days. And I was going to call and just say no. But something, tonight, makes me think I can approach you with this idea."

Hema raises an eyebrow. "An arranged marriage?"

"Listen, you do not have to agree to this at all...now...but an arranged marriage is not a bad thing...your mother and I...we know what you need...we know what will suit you...we know what blood will mix with your blood... and so...do not look at this negatively. And you are getting older. Soon you will be past that age where you will not

object to being flexible for your partner. You will be too tightly fitted into your lifestyle. You know?"

"Yeah. Keep talking." She isn't irritated so much as she's shocked.

"He lives in New York City. A pharmacist. Immigrated here a couple of years ago. His name is Amit." Amal isn't sure whether he should hope she'll agree to this or reject the idea from the start. Hema's so unpredictable and stubborn.

Hema doesn't think. Just sits there for a minute. And then a few more.

"Well Hema? Will you meet him?"

"No." She's so firm in her answer.

She isn't going to tell David about this.

IV

David and Hema are in Hema's apartment. David sits on the bed. "I thought you said you'd be ready when I got here..."

"You're mad at me because I want to look nice for you?"

"No, but—"

"Then shut up." She's standing in front of the mirror, applying mascara. She's staring at her right eye's lashes, squinting, trying to get every lash just...right. She's so meticulous.

"Hurry *up*, Hema." David lies down on the bed, his feet still firmly planted on the ground.

"Don't you *dare* rush me." She turns around to look at him, hand on hip, mascara wand raised in the air. She smiles at him, walks over to him, sits down next to him, leans over him, and kisses him. She sits up. "Five more minutes."

David sighs.

Hema goes back to the mirror. She looks into it. Her makeup's finished. She looks...just...so...near perfection. Long lashes. Flawless skin. Red lips. Perfect hair. Hema grabs the dress from the hanger on the closet door. She slips into it. "David, come zip it up in the back, would you?"

He sighs and sits up. Then he grins. He walks up behind her and slips his hands under the dress.

She shakes her head. "Uh-uh. No. *Zip it.*"

"Don't act like you don't want to." He grins into the mirror, looking at her reflection.

She frowns.

"You don't fool me, Hema."

"Zip, man!"

"Fine." David zips her dress.

She turns around. "What do you think. How do I look?"

"Like Hema... with red lipstick on." David grins.

"You're an asshole. Can't you tell a girl she looks pretty?"

"I'm not the type."

Hema groans.

"Why do you always put your hair in a bun like that?"

"Don't know." Hema goes to the bathroom.

"Mom always had her hair in a bun..."

She says from the bathroom, "I'm done. We can go now!"

Hema and David go to the Indian cultural show at NYU's Skirball Center. They sit near the back of the hall, holding hands. Hema strokes his skin. She's nervous, wondering if he wants to watch this performance. Indian classical dance doesn't seem to be David's forte. It never has been.

"David?" she asks, not looking at him.

"Hmm?"

“You don't mind coming, do you?” She turns her head slightly, so as to see his profile.

He looks at her. “Why would I come if I didn't want to?”

“You want to be here?”

“Sure.”

“Really?” Her eyes are wide. She's surprised.

David laughs. “Why do you think I came?”

“Cause I asked.”

He laughs some more. “Don't flatter yourself. I don't do things unless I want to.”

The opening number's a bharatanatyam dancer wrapped in a peacock green sari. Her bright red lips are visible, even from the distance Hema and David sit at. Her black hair's in some intricate bun, flowers weaving in and out of it. “Wow,” Hema whispers, her breath slightly caught in her chest.

David strokes her hand.

Hema turns to look at him. “She looks like a *goddess*.”

They sit through the rest of the show. Hema still relatively silent, shoved into a state of awe as the colors dance before her and the thunder-like effect of the dancers' feet hit the stage floor.

As Hema and David leave the show, Joya calls her. "Let me answer this," Hema says. "It's my friend, Joya."

"All right." David's hands are in his pocket. Hema's slides her's into his coat pocket, too. They walk, rhythmically in tune with each other. One steady gait. David's parked his car relatively far, per Hema's request. *I do wish you'd walk more.*

"Hey, Joya." Pause. "Sure." Pause. "Wow. Really? I don't know..." Pause. "Well...I figured he wouldn't—" Pause. "Hmm...let me check. I'll call back in a few." Pause. "K. Bye." Hema hangs up. She looks up at David.

"What?"

"So...my friend Joya's having...a sort of shin dig..."

"Shin dig?" They're outside now.

Hema presses closer. "A small party."

"Mhmm..."

"Let's go?"

"Well..."

"Please...I've told her about you...and it'd be nice if my friends finally got to meet you." She presses his hand with hers.

David sighs. "What'd you tell them, Hema?"

"Just that you're a friend from way back in the day..." Hema's face brightens.

"Oh! You remember those girls I was with that night we met?"

"Mhmm."

"Well it'll be them, and a handful of others....probably just their dates...etc, etc, etc."

"I wish you hadn't made me park so far."

Hema looks down at the ground. "If I can walk in these heels, I don't see why you're complaining."

David looks at her.

"Please?"

He continues looking at her.

"What? You don't want to meet my friends? It's been this long, and you still don't want to meet the other people in my life?"

David stays silent.

Hema frowns. Looks away.

"Hema..." She won't look at him. "Hema, I'm only kidding!"

She looks up at him. "Oh."

"Where's she live?"

"You. Are. Such. An. Asshole." Her steps match the beat of her words.

David laughs. "You throw tantrums so quick."

"Jerk." Hema texts Joya: *Be there in a bit.* "I did *not* throw a tantrum."

Joya texts back: *Yay!*

At the party, Hema becomes default bartender. David stands next to her. "Didn't know you knew how to mix drinks so well..."

"You don't know a lot," she says, winking at him. Hema's tipsy. She leans into him, holding the cocktail shaker.

"Hey, don't make the drinks so stiff," David whispers into her ear, "I don't think everyone else can handle them so strong."

Hema laughs. Turns around. And says to his face, "You've been drinking them all night. And you don't feel a thing."

"Well, I'm not everyone else."

Hema snorts. "I have to finish this dirty girl scout for Joya." Hema pauses. Then turns around. "Hey, what do you think of her?"

"She's coming over here..."

Joya and Alaa walk up to the counter. Alaa leans over it, pushing her breasts together. "So...uh...bartender...how're you and your man holding up?"

If Hema were a few shades lighter, her friends and David would see her blushing. "We're fine."

Joya saunters over to the other side of the counter and stands next to David. She looks at the few people in her living room, walking around and talking. She leans in a little toward David and asks quietly, "So, how's it working out between you and Hema...you know...with the parents and all...'cause...I know...she's...she doesn't give most guys a chance...you're...I think she's been waiting around for *you*."

Hema can't hear everything Joya's saying. But, she's irritated. She doesn't need to have her friends warn David. She leans in between David and Joya. "Guys, I can help myself...FYI."

David leans away from the two women. "I'll be right back. Where's the bathroom, Joya?"

"Down the hall and to the left." Joya uses her right hand's index finger to point out the way.

"Thanks."

As soon as he walks away, Joya closes in on Hema. Alaa walks over to the side of the counter with Hema and Joya. "All right, how's the sex?" Alaa asks, grinning.

"What?" Hema asks, dropping the shaker. She bends down to pick it up.

Joya says, "I think you've shaken that thing enough. Forget about it for a second."

"Lord, I'm tipsy," Hema comments.

"Bull-fucking-shit." Alaa crosses her arms. "Well?"

Hema looks at her and frowns. "Did I say anything about sex?"

"No...But I can tell these sort of things...It's an instinct all Arab women have," Alaa says. Her curls are dramatically voluminous. Hema thinks they match the shiny, purple blouse she's wearing.

Joya leans in. "So...you finally...you know..."

Hema nods: *yes*.

Alaa shrieks quietly. Joya grins. Hema looks at the wall opposite her.

Joya stops. "Wait...what are you guys? Are you dating?"

"No." Hema looks at Joya. "We don't need a label."

“Oh Lord...that line...” Joya smirks. “So what’re you...friends with benefits?”

Hema opens her mouth, about to object, then stops. She calmly says, “No.”

“So you’re dating,” Alaa says.

“No. We can’t date. My parents would kill me.”

“Then why’re you wasting your time?” Joya asks. She’s the analytical one of the group.

“I’m not...I just don’t expect for this to actually go anywhere.”

“That’s bull shit, Hema. You’re both going to end up miserable. It’ll be too much of an emotional toll.” Joya crosses her arms, looking down at Hema.

Alaa laughs. “In that case, baby, leave it purely physical.”

Hema groans. “I hate you guys. I really, really hate you guys.”

David comes back. Hema hears his shoes clack on the kitchen floor. She turns around. “Took you long enough.”

“I was washing my hands properly.”

Hema laughs. “Right.”

David turns to Joya. “Nice place you’ve got here.”

“Thanks.”

Alaa cuts in. “Umm...I live here, too!”

David turns to her. “Nice place you’ve got here, Alaa.”

She smiles, playing coy. “Why thank you.”

Hema remembers Phoebe. “Where’s Phoebe?”

Alaa’s eyes become huge. “Oh...she met this guy. He asked her out. You know...the one-on-one thing...” Alaa bursts out laughing.

"Maybe I made her drinks a little too strong," Hema mutters.

David moves closer to Hema as the night progresses. While talking to Alaa's brother, his arm's around her waist. While sitting on the sofa, he kisses her on the cheek. And while Hema goes to the bathroom, he follows her. Stops her in the hallway. And takes advantage of the lonely few seconds.

"David..." she complains.

He grins. "Live a little, baby...."

She frowns. "Don't call me baby."

"Let's just *go*."

She frowns some more. "You're not having a good time?"

"I am. I am. I've met your friends. Now I think we should...you know..."

She raises an eyebrow. "Eww." She tries to keep her mouth firm. Stern. Crosses her arms across her chest.

"Don't even...you *know* you want to, too."

"Shut up." She swats his arm away, the one trying to encircle itself around her waist.

"Listen, let me know when you want to leave. We can go back and just chill..."

She smiles. "That sounds good."

David pats her on the butt and leaves her.

“David!”

Hema and David approach Joya and Alaa. Hema says, “All right guys, we’re going to head out—“

“Already?” Alaa asks.

“Yeah...it’s getting kind of late—“ Hema begins.

Joya shakes her head. “Not really...not for us single folk.” She laughs.

Hema blushes.

David cuts in, “It was nice meeting you all. I’m sure I’ll see all again.”

Hema and David slip out, holding their coats in their arms.

Slipping their coats on and walking down the stairs, Hema interrupts their silent rush out of the apartment building. “You know what we should do?”

“What?”

“Watch *Philadelphia Story*.”

David groans.

Hema stops walking. “What?”

“We watched *Bringing Up, Baby* last Sunday.”

Hema looks at him.

“Fine.”

Hema looks at him.

“I’m not just saying that.” Begrudgingly he admits, “Fine...I’ll admit it....Cary Grant makes me feel like a man...”

Hema snorts. “You and your ego...”

“I don’t have an ego.”

“And I don’t have black hair.”

David and Hema are watching *Philadelphia Story*. His silver Jaguar’s parked in front of the apartment building. Hema’s curled under his right arm. Black hair pulled back in a bun. No makeup. She’s wearing glasses. Yellow and white-striped pajama pants and white tank top. Hema’s still tipsy. And becoming more tipsy. They picked up wine on the way back to her apartment. David’s playing with some strands of her hair, wrapping them around his fingers. Then unraveling them from his fingers. Then repeating the process. She smells good. Like the aftermath of a shower. (She’s just showered.) He holds her a little tighter and a little closer. When she smiles, sometimes, her nose scrunches up (crinkling in an uncharacteristic manner for a nose) and she bites her bottom lip. It isn’t exactly a smile, but a modified version of one. Still an expression of

happiness, nonetheless. She kisses him on the mouth. Full on the mouth, eyes open. Her lips lift up in a smile, mid-way through.

He pulls back. "You smile when you kiss me."

She goes back to watching the movie. The volume's low, almost muted, on the television. David can barely hear the dialogue. It isn't a problem for Hema. She's watched this movie countless times.

"Not interested in yourself? You're fascinated, Red [Hepburn]. You're your favorite person in the world." Grant then turns to Jimmy Stewart, "Of course, Mr. Connor [Stewart], she's generous to a fault."

"To a fault, Mr. Connor," Hepburn mocks.

Hema knows all these lines by heart. She plays them out for David. All of them. David looks down at her.

Grant again, "She finds human imperfection unforgivable." Pause in the mimicking of Grant. Hema gathers her thoughts. Breathes in deep again. Back in character. Grant says, "When I gradually discovered my relationship to her was not to be that of a loving husband and companion, but—" Pause, again. She smiles up at David. David looks down at her. "But that of a kind of high priest to a virgin goddess."

Hema's hand goes to the night stand, reaches for her glass. She takes a sip. Sets the glass down. Turns to David. David kisses her on the mouth. "Isn't she lovely?" If she doesn't smile, then she talks, in the middle of a kiss.

Hema's drunk off the wine. It's begun to rain outside. They lay in bed, not sleeping. The fire escape's outside her bedroom's window. Hema's been stripped down to nothing but her bra and underwear. She's still wearing her glasses. She opens the curtain and looks outside.

"Close the curtain, Hema, please. Someone'll see," David says from the bed. He's lost his shirt somewhere in the room, too.

"Afraid of a few eyes? You know...I'm an exhibitionist."

"I like my privacy."

She laughs, tilting her head back. If her head fell off because she's bent it so far back... She stops laughing. Bends her head upright, again. Opens the window and crawls out on to the fire escape.

"Hey! What're you doing? Are you insane?" David's out of bed and at the window now, head sticking out into the night. "Hema come back inside before someone sees you."

"It's not as if no one's ever seen a woman's body before."

"Come back in, Hema, you'll catch a cold."

She sings out loudly, "Look at me! Look at me!"

"Hema, you're fucking drunk. Come back in." He's finally managed to grab hold of her arm and pulls her in. She folds into the open window, stumbling through, and onto the wooden floor of her room.

"Here I am!" she's spread her arms out in victory.

Early in the morning, Hema's phone rings. She groans. Rolls over in bed. David's turned away from her. She looks at the phone. *Home*. "David." He doesn't respond. She pinches him. "David."

"Hmm?"

"My parents are calling. Be quiet."

"Mmm."

"Hello?" she answers.

"Hema, where were you last night?" Chitra's voice sounds especially shrill in the morning.

She remembers. This wakes her up. Her parents called her last night. She didn't answer. "You called?"

"Yes...you did not answer!"

Amal asks, "Where were you?"

"Oh...sorry...I must've fallen asleep."

"You did not hear your phone?" Amal asks.

"I've been leaving it on vibrate. Sorry, Baba."

"You cannot call your parents before going to sleep?" Chitra snaps.

“I’m sorry...I’m sorry...I was just tired.” David rustles in bed. Hema slides her foot along his leg. She pulls the quilt, bringing it up to her neck.

Amal sighs. Hema can see him grit his teeth. “Hema, I do not know what you are doing there. I am sick of this. *Sick.*”

Hema feels fear. “Baba, I said I’m sorry.” Tears come to her eyes. Perhaps they know. David turns around and looks at her. He slides his arm around her hips and pulls her to him.

Chitra says, “What are you doing now?”

“I just woke up.”

“This late?” she asks. “You do not go to the gym in the morning?”

“Like I said, Ma, I’m tired.”

Chitra sighs. “I do not know. I do not know.” This is the mantra she always repeats.

“Do you want us to come up?” Amal asks.

“No. It’s Sunday...I have some errands to run.”

He sighs. “Ok. Well, call later.

David, walking out of the bathroom, with nothing but a towel, stretches, yawning loudly. “I’ve got a great idea...get ready.”

“I still have to shower,” Hema says, from the bed. She can't get herself to smile at him. She gets up, unashamed of her nakedness. David follows her into the bathroom. She begins brushing her teeth. She turns on the shower.

“The water's already hot. I just showered.”

She shrugs her shoulders, brushing her teeth rather furiously. She rinses her mouth out. “Get me a fresh towel, would you?” she asks, stepping under the water.

David brings a baby blue one over and hangs it on the towel rack. He pushes open the shower curtain...just a little.

She slaps his hand. “Don't.”

David laughs.

“You laugh like a hyena!”

Hema comes out of the shower to find David dressed, sitting on a made bed. She smiles. “You just made my morning that much better.”

“What? ‘Cause I made your bed?”

“Mhmm.” Hema wraps her hair in the towel and begins the post-showering process: moisturizing, drying her hair, etc, etc.

David comes up behind her. “What's wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Bull shit.”

She smiles. “I hate lying to them.”

While drying her hair, David tries to help her. Only, he makes problems for her. Hema doesn't know how to tell him to stop. So, she accepts the fact that her hair's going to be less than perfect today. She uses the hair straightener to remedy some of the problem spots. It works relatively well. She isn't too flustered. “You know, I don't feel like putting on any makeup today.”

“Don't.”

She shrugs her shoulders. “K.” Hema opens her closet and chooses some of her plainest clothes. She hates trying too hard on Sunday. Hema picks out a plain long-sleeved, gray t-shirt and dark jeans. And flat shoes.

David furrows his eyebrows. “This is an easy look for you...”

“It's Sunday...”

“Got it.”

“All right, so what did you say you want to do today?” She asks, sidling up to him.

David grins. “Is someone getting frisky...”

She pulls away. “Stop....”

He laughs, pulling her closer. “I'm kidding. I'm kidding. Anyways...let's go out for breakfast.”

Hema sighs. “*David*...I'm trying to watch what I eat.”

He rolls his eyes. “You're *fine*. You're body's great. You *can* eat food, every once in a while, like a normal person!”

His outburst silences her. She inhales sharply. "Ok."

David slumps a little. "I'm sorry. Do you want to go out for breakfast? I'm starving."

"Yeah, let's go."

David drives for forty minutes... forty minutes that take them out of the New York state limits and into Jersey. Hema asks, "Where are you going?"

"You'll see."

Hema fidgets in her seat. The sun beats down on her side, warming the seat, making her uncomfortable. "I'm hot."

"Take your coat off."

Hema huffs. "Where are we going?"

"You'll see." David looks at her and grins.

"Why can't you just tell me?"

"Because I don't want to."

"Why?" she whines.

"My car... I decide where we go."

“You’re a jerk.” She stares out the window, suddenly nervous that her parents will see them together. They are, after all, in New Jersey. “Hey...isn’t this around your old house...”

David grins. “So you remember!” He taps the steering wheel, beating out some tune.

“David?” Hema feels sick.

“Hmm?”

“David?”

He turns to catch a glimpse of her. “What’s wrong?”

“What if Ma and Baba see us?”

“Hema...my God...we...” He groans. “We can’t run from them...hide from them...I...”

“I know...I just...They’d...They’d go crazy if they found out.”

David sighs. “All right. Well, I won’t go around their place. You want to go back?”

Hema looks at his face. The lines on his face look so hard. “No. Let’s get that breakfast.”

David doesn’t smile like before. “All right.”

After breakfast, David says, "We can leave Jersey. I just want to show you one thing. Ok?"

Hema breathes in deeply. "Yeah. Sure." She smiles, trying to encourage him and comfort herself. Ma and Baba can't do much. She doesn't live at home anymore.

David speeds. Drive recklessly. And within a few minutes—minutes where Hema scratches at the arm rest—they're in David's parents' driveway. "Dad never sold the house."

"I know..." Hema whispers. They're back..."Wow," she whispers.

David grins. Nods his head. "Yeah."

He takes the key out of the ignition and dangles his set in front of her. "I've got the key..."

"To go inside?"

"Yeah. Dad gave it to me a while ago."

"Wow..."

"Want to go inside?"

"Yeah..." she whispers.

They sit in the basement, Hema lying on the mattress, David on the floor. Neither says anything.

Hema breaks the silence. "It smells musty in here."

"Nobody's been in here for a while."

Hema chuckles. She leans over the edge of the mattress, pulls David's chin towards her, and kisses him. She pulls away. "Remember that?"

David grins.

"Hey, you kind of have dimples," Hema says, angling her head and squinting her eyes. "Kind of."

"You know...that day...the kiss...it was...so weird...I knew I wasn't allowed to do that. Mom had always told me to behave properly around your parents. She was always so nervous that your mom didn't like her. She'd always beg me to be polite and be nice to you and...I hated seeing her like that...so nervous...and scared...of what your parents thought of her...you know...so I always...sort of...just dealt with you being there...then, that day, you just...you looked different...and...it all...slapped me in the face...you know?"

Hema pushes herself up, lying on her stomach, leaning on her elbows. She holds back a frown. "You didn't think I looked beautiful, just different?"

David moves up on the mattress and pulls her close to him. "What's this?"

"What's what?" She looks in his face. Memorizing each feature. Then nuzzles her face against his cheek.

"Us."

Hema cuts him off. "David...Dad told me about a marriage proposal the last time I went home."

He pushes her away. Looks at her.

"I said no. I'm not going to just be...set on a marriage altar."

"I understand *your* problem with your parents. I get it. But you have to deal with that."

Hema says nothing, but sits up and rests her palms on her thighs. She looks down at her lap. "What do I do?"

"Your call."

A tear falls down on to her hand. "They'd...they'd fucking...I don't know...go crazy...they'd...they'd rather burn me off the family tree than...than take this... if they knew...if they knew what I was up to..." She begins to heave, unwilling to cry openly.

"Don't...don't cry..." David pulls her close.

This doesn't stop her. This increases the flow of tears. Hema's shoulders heave heavier. Don't cry. Don't cry.

David holds her.

Hema tries hard...so hard to make herself stop crying. She heaves. Her shoulders shake. She hasn't cried in so long. She suppresses the emotions. She wipes her own tears away. Dries her face with her shirt sleeve. "I don't know what to do." Her voice thick with emotion. She can feel it in the back of her throat. Making it hard to enunciate.

"What's going on in your head?"

She shrugs her shoulders. "I don't know...this...it's so *hard*...but...the future...what...what...I don't know how..."

He shakes his head no. He moves closer to her. "Just let it happen, Hema. And...your parents...that you have to figure out."

Hema goes home for the weekend. She stands near the sink, in the kitchen, watching Chitra preparing a dish of sweet meats. Amit—the pharmacist—and his sister and her husband are coming. She wasn't informed of this until she was in her old bedroom, looking out its window.

Chitra's planned it out: Amit and Hema will meet each other. They'll get a chance to be alone. To talk. To see if they can spend their lives together.

Hema's been told by Chitra that she's to behave nicely. No snarky remarks. No sly glances. *No scaring them away, Hema.*

Amal's in the family room, watching television. He's been banned from the living room (he'll ruin the just vacuumed carpet with footprints). Hema's still standing silently in the kitchen. She isn't all that old. This isn't the time for her.

Hema goes to her room. Leaves the door open. Looks into the mirror. She's wearing a black salwar kameez with white hand stitching. It's understated. But gorgeous. If Amit's the man for her, he'll think she's gorgeous. David doesn't know what's happening today. Hema leans in close to the mirror and checks the crevices of her lips to

see if the lipstick has become too heavy and dry in those spots. She picks up her phone.
To call David.

“Hello?” she hears, before she realizes she’s called him.

“David?” Her voice sounds hoarse to her. As if she’s about to lose it.

She can feel David grin through the line. “Hey...I kind of like this
hoarseness...could get used to it...what’re you...sick?”

“No.” She sits on the line.

“What’s wrong?”

“Why do you think something’s wrong?” She shuts her bedroom door. Sits on the
bed. Stares into her reflection. Tears always roll down her cheeks and make her feel like a
young girl. She tightly squeezes her eyes shut. The tears won’t fall. She sniffles.

“What’s wrong? Are your parents giving you a hard time?” David sounds serious.

“What do you care? You don’t care.”

“Don’t start playing games, Hema. What’s the matter?”

“Nothing.” Another sniffle.

David sighs. “Ok.”

“Don’t you care about me?” she asks. Again, her voice feels heavy with emotion.
It weighs down in the back of her throat.

She can hear him suck in air through his nose. “You know I do...”

“Aren’t you going to ask why I came home?”

“Why did you come home?”

“Ma and Baba invited that pharmacist guy and his sister and brother-in-law over.”

David stays silent.

“David?”

“Why didn't you tell me before?”

“I didn't know.” Her voice trembles. “Ma and Baba told me last night, after I got here.”

“Don't cry, Hema. They won't force you to do anything you don't want to.”

“I know.” Hema drags her pointer finger across the quilt, dust collecting under her nail. She breathes in. “I don't want this...” Her voice still trembles. She wants a topic change. “What're you doing? How was your day?”

“I'm watching basketball. My day was fine. How was yours?”

“Fine.” She sits on the bed. Pouts. She feels nine, again.

“What're you wearing?”

Hema smiles. He knows how to distract her. “A black salwar kameez.”

“Black? That's so somber...”

“You'd love it, darling.” She always wants to call him ‘darling,’ but always feels it's too endearing of a term for someone like her to use. “And it's got see-through sleeves and all this intricate white stitching on the back...very post-modern edgy...very simple...” She trails off, almost about to say, ‘If Amit has any taste, he'll like it.’

“Sounds nice.” She hears him shuffling around.

“What're you doing?”

“Sitting up.”

“Oh...” She bites her bottom lip. Then realizes she's wearing lipstick. “I'm wearing red lipstick.”

David snorts. “Good thing I'm not there.”

“I don't know why you don't like red lipstick.”

“It's not that I don't like red lipstick. I don't like anything that looks too loud...doesn't look natural...I like...subtlety...:”

“Chose the wrong girl,” Hema mutters.

“Shut up.”

Hema grimaces.

David chuckles. “All right. What'd your mom cook? I know she made food...”

David and Hema fall into conversation about food and her mother's ability to cook well.

While talking, David reminds her he used to love eating her mom's lamb curry. Hema

sits on the bed, pulling her feet up to sit Indian style, first kicking off her shoes. The day

seems to stretch out before her. She listens to him talk, the sound of his voice soothing

her. She doesn't understand, though, what he says. Instead, Hema thinks of that first kiss

they'd had. How it had unleashed a sexual appetite within her. The desire to kiss. That

odd sensation she'd get, sometimes, in her abdomen, feeling as if she'd wanted to pull her

entire body into itself through the vagina. If she could just pull herself within her...she'd

be relieved...she felt it just then...that...sexuality.

She sighs.

“What?”

“Nothing.” David continues talking. Hema continues thinking. She'd read so

many books about sex. So many stories about love. And yet, she'd never felt anything

like it until then...until David. And then, that arousal. And David. They worked well. So

well. Together. She'd wanted to claw at her inside walls on nights when he wasn't there.

That sort of understanding...that ability to...reach...something...*metaphysical*. She feels

embarrassment. She's being so sentimental. She's being so...love...these types of things...they don't really exist...these emotions...and...yet...she's sure...sure that she and David...this doesn't happen every day...the way he knows she paints her lips and nails to stop herself from biting them...that she studies *Vogue* magazines (even the international issues)...that she's really a nice girl...that he treats her softly and gently and caresses her delicately, like she wants, when alone, like she wants...he...knows her...so well...he...Hema groans. Amit will never make her feel like this. No other man will.

“David?”

David stops talking.

“David?”

“Yeah?”

“Love.” It's all implied.

He understand the delicacy of the moment. “You.”

Hema hears the doorbell ring. She tells him they're here. He tells her to call him when the pharmacist leaves.

Sitting between Amal and Chitra on the living room sofa, Hema wishes she'd ask David if she and him would turn out to be like Sandra and Rafi Uncle. If she knew the answer to this question, then she could tell the pharmacist to piss off...

Piss off.

Her mouth twists into a smirk. She doesn't intend for this to happen.

She looks at him sitting next to his brother-in-law. The sister yapping about something or another in her high-pitched voice. Hema cringed when she had heard her initially. He looks like a waiter in his slicked to the side hair and black trousers and white shirt. He doesn't seem at all aggressive or confident or sexually sure of himself. She wonders if he's a virgin. The pharmacist, on a very basic, visual level, doesn't measure up to David.

Hema knows Chitra's waiting for Hema to get up and pour tea from the tea pot and serve it to their guests. Hema waits for Chitra to tell her to do this. Willful girl...

She can just hear the grumblings within Chitra's mind.

Hema continues to smirk.

She looks defiantly at the pharmacist, daring him to look up from his lap and look at her. He *does*, after all, sell her her birth control. Irony...

"We've met before, haven't we?" Hema dares the pharmacist to announce to the room she buys birth control from him.

He looks up at her. He looks...annoyed. Ah...perhaps there's *some* fire in him. "I think you come to my pharmacy..."

Chitra frowns. "What do you go to the pharmacy for? You never told us you were sick." Chitra turns to look at Hema.

This is his chance to ruin her in front of everyone. Hema digs her nails into the sofa's cloth. Instead, he smiles. "Oh, Auntie, nothing...you know...the usual...medication for headaches...you know..."

Chitra smooths her brows. "Oh." She laughs. "I can be so silly sometimes..." she looks at the sister, "You know how it is...my only daughter..."

The sister, with her fat chin and gaudy jewelry, cuts in, "Oh, how sweet! You two know each other already...the pharmacist marries the girl who he puts prescriptions together for..." She begins to laugh. Her husband sits silent, looking at his cell phone.

Hema wonders if the pharmacist can accept her dark skin, her short hair, her daring eyes, her red lips, her plunging neck lines, her short skirts, her tight pants, her sexuality...her sense of self...her...American-ness. She smiles at him. He looks back at her, mouth tight. He's stingy with smiles. So she gives him another. He looks like the type who wants a nice girl. A simple girl. Hema feels herself get irritated. He wants someone who will cook him dinner. Someone who will lay under him during sex. Someone who won't ask him to do things. Someone who will have his children. And go to clean movies. And eat at Indian restaurants (on the nights she's too tired to cook). He wants someone who will stay home with the children and call his mother *Ma*. And go grocery shopping with *Ma* at the Bengali grocery stores and barter for a better price for fish imported from the Bangladesh. A girl who, at most, will ask for gold jewelry on Eid. One who will look to his sister for friendship, not some American girl who will fill her head with rebellious, Western ideas. One who will cook curry every day, wear cotton pajamas, and sing Bengali rhymes to their children at bedtime.

Hema snorts.

The pharmacist looks at her.

Chitra frowns.

Amal looks at the closed front door.

No, she won't be able to be wife to this pharmacist.

Besides—she looks at the sister—the sister's about twenty-seven pounds too heavy with a bad hair-dye job and is wearing too much blue eye shadow with her pink sari. Hema's lips curve into a crescent moon smile.

Regardless of David, the pharmacist just won't do for her. She'd crush him between her pointer finger and thumb.

He doesn't even have the gusto to look into her face.

Chitra and the sister are conveniently touring the house and backyard. Amal and the brother-in-law have gone to the family room to watch soccer. Hema's left alone with the pharmacist. Hema looks directly into his face. She smiles at him. Tilts her head a little to the right.

He looks at Hema.

She straightens her head. "Am I making you uncomfortable?"

"No." He tilts his chin up. Sets his mouth firmly.

She leans forward. Rests her elbows on her knees. Clasps her hands together. Her orna slides down to her elbows (she'd had it carelessly thrown across her neck). She doesn't fix it. "What do you think of this?"

"I don't want to marry you." So the pharmacist does have some gusto. He can tell her this much.

She laughs. Tilts her head back. "Why not?"

"I can't love you."

"And I couldn't love you." Her face becomes serious. "And yet...here we are. Sitting across from each other. Alone."

"I'm in love with someone else."

Hema nods her head in understanding. "Oh?"

"Her name's Charu. She's nothing like you..."

"She doesn't buy birth control," Hema says softly, suddenly vulnerable. She looks up at him, through her lashes.

"No, she doesn't." His arms are crossed against his chest. He leans back in the chair. He looks down at her.

"I'm in love with someone else, too. He's nothing like you..."

"I would imagine so."

"So...what do we do? Why did you agree to meet me?" Hema sits up straight, pushes her orna against her neck, pulls stray hairs behind her ears.

"I don't know...this...it wouldn't work...us..."

She raises an eyebrow. "You don't think?"

"No. This wouldn't work. We want different things." He pauses. His lips apart. He breathes through his mouth. "So what now?"

"I tell my father no."

"And that's it?"

“That’s it.”

“What if it did...” he begins.

She shakes her head. Purses her lips. “No.”

V

Hema and David sit in the park. She raises her face to the sun. "This feels good."

He kisses her neck.

"I want to get bronze...purple bronze." She shakes her hair away from her neck.

Her bangs stand straight up, a breeze blowing against them. She sighs. The breeze stops.

She tilts her head back to normal.

"Dad called me the other day."

"Yeah?"

"He got invited to Uncle Harun's daughter's wedding."

Hema chuckles. "Of course he'd get invited...Baba, Rafi Uncle, Harun Uncle...they were all classmates..." She slips her hand into his. "She's getting married in New Jersey you know...is Rafi Uncle going to go?"

"Are you going?"

"I have to...with Ma and Baba."

"I think Dad wants to go, too."

"Get out." She exaggerates her surprise. "He never goes to anything anymore."

"Well...something about seeing everyone..." David pauses. "I think it has something to do with Mom's death...it'll be four years next week."

Hema whistles. "Oh yeah."

"He probably feels guilty...she always wanted to go to this sort of stuff. He was always the one too afraid to go."

Hema nods her head.

"So...I was thinking...what do you think about...me going, too?"

Hema crinkles her forehead. Makes a silly face. "What? To the wedding? You?"

"Yeah."

She laughs. "I dare you."

"I told Dad I'd go."

She stares at him, mouth slightly agape. "Get out..."

He shrugs his shoulders. "Thought I'd start..."

"What...what're you...trying to be more Bengali...for me?"

He guffaws. "Honey, please, don't flatter yourself."

She frowns. "Asshole." She crosses her arms across her chest. "Really though...why're you going?"

"Dad didn't want to go by himself. And I wouldn't mind. I'm sure there'll be a lot of pretty girls there. Might find someone for myself."

Hema rolls her eyes. "Right." Then her eyes widen. "Wait...we'll both be at the same wedding...oh David..." she whispers. "We *cannot* let Ma and Baba figure out...you know...about us."

David breathes in and out heavily. "I'm not stupid, Hema. I know how this shit goes. As much as I wasn't there all the time, I still know how the social circle works...Damn!" He looks away from her. "Fucking feels like middle school again...hide from the girl's big, bad, scary daddy!"

She jerks his chin towards her. "What? You want to tell Ma and Baba about us?"

He grits his teeth. "I know...I know...it's just hard. This is...it's different than all the other girls I've been with."

The argument continues escalating. “What? So now you’ve been with a whole shit ton of girls? How many other girls, huh? Huh, David?”

“I’m not answering that. And don’t raise your voice. We’re in public.” He pulls his face out of her grasp.

She looks straight ahead, staring at one tree or another. “Well, go to the wedding, if you want. But don’t get me in trouble.”

“Let’s go. I’m ready to leave.” He stands up. Waits for Hema to get up, too.

“You’re an asshole.” An afterthought, she adds, “It’s this weekend...”

The wedding’s in South Jersey. Hema comes home the night before. She decides on wearing a simple, sheer, georgette, red sari. She has to wait for Chitra to wrap it around her. She still can’t do it herself. Chitra pinches her during the process. Berates her for having such a slim waist. *It is so hard when I have to wrap it around this many times!* It becomes complicated. She just stares into her black cat-eyes in the mirror and admires her nude-colored lips. She’s puts her hair up in an intricate bun. And just simple, silver hoop earrings. During the car ride to the wedding venue, she wonders what David will think of her sari. Her blouse’s back-baring with a high collar and short sleeves. Amal’s already given her a disapproving look. She can be such a stressful daughter. Hema bites her lips with this thought.

She wants to text David. See what he's up to. If he's already there. But she won't. He's probably at the reception already. Her parents are running late. She sits in the backseat and watches their headrests. She looks out the window. The ride feels so long.

Amal and Chitra converse with one another quietly, she hears bits and pieces.

"Rafi will be there, I think," Amal says. Hema's ears perk up. This she needs to hear.

"Is that so?" Chitra asks.

"Yes. I spoke to him the other day."

"When?"

"On the phone..."

"Where was I?"

"Out I think."

"Oh..." Chitra smirks. "You call your friends when I am not home."

"Do not start, please."

Chitra chuckles.

"I think he will bring David with him, as well."

"Why?...how *strange*..."

"I do not know...perhaps he is beginning to understand what he is missing..."

Chitra laughs at this. "He is probably trying to find a nice girl for his son."

"No...Rafi is not that type."

"What about Hema..." Chitra whispers. Hema strains her ears even more to hear this last part. She imagines her ear muscles stretched taut.

“You worry without reason, Chitra.” He sounds statue-esque. Hema imagines him to be made from marble. Difficult to move his lips.

She pretends to be asleep when Amal turns around to look at her. He can't look for too long. He's driving.

In the banquet hall's parking lot, Hema cautiously texts David: *We're here*. She hopes her parents don't notice her texting.

Hema carefully steps out of the car, making sure her stilettos don't get stuck in the parking lot's cracks. She follows behind Chitra and Amal, wishing she had a younger sister. The walk through the main entrance's uncomfortable. Men. Husbands. Brothers. Sons. Nephews. They all stand around it. Some smoke cigarettes. The others talk to the smokers. They eye her. Strutting in her youth and boldness. That sway of her hips and the sheerness of her sari. She's overtly alluring. And they'll acknowledge that, silently. There's a breeze. Her achal's pinned to her blouse, it can't fly away. A sister would take

away her role as display object. The last step of the walk, she holds her chin high. She'll flaunt herself. Of course they'll watch... The glittering ornamentation of a Bengali wedding; she'll be a part of it; rare, unexpected jewel. The hall buzzes with chatter and joy and excitement. Brats run past her, she stops, allowing them to rustle against her sari. The last girl, tripping on the skirt of her own lehenga, rips some beading off its bottom trim with her white shoes. She stops. Looks down at her dress. *Uh-oh*. Hema smiles. Slinks over to the girl. Kneels down. "Here, if you wear the skirt a little higher, you won't ruin your dress." Hema pulls the skirt up some. Tightens the drawstring. "Is that too tight?" The girl shakes her head. *No*. She bites her lips. Looks over her shoulders. Her friends must be having fun. Hema smiles. Nods her head in their direction. "I think they went that way." Hema stands up. The girl runs to find her brat brigade. Everyone's standing, walking, talking. Hema's following her parents to a table. They'll sit down. They'll be on the peripheries of the room, taking in the action. She listens to the gossip around her. The groom should arrive in a little bit. How much will he pay to get in? The bride's side will, undoubtedly, block the doorway until he pays. The bride's beautiful. He'll have to pay a high amount. Oh, do you think her sneaky, little brothers will steal his shoes? That happened at one wedding in the City...took them right off his feet while he was eating! The cackling laughter. The cheer in the hawk-eyes of women. These are the women that will judge her when their conversations have come to a close and they're threatened with boredom. She feels a twinge in her abdomen. They continue. They feel so important in their old age with their fat rolls jiggling under their saris. Their husbands stand close, quiet, waiting for the first chance to escape, needing a cigarette break. More glimmers of conversation, their tinkling laughter. The groom must suit that girl. She's so

beautiful. Such a lovely match. She's a pharmacist. He's a doctor. Ah, but they'll be so busy with work, when will they see one another? Oh, no, that'll be good. That way, the honeymoon stage will last longer than that first year. She looks around and sees the young sons and daughters flock the hall, looking for their friends. So they can conspire. How to meet so-and-so's son in the coat room. How to check out whether it's true: so-and-so finally grew some mosquito bites on her chest. The laughter. They scramble here. Then there. Trying to find the perfect spot, away from the parents. Perhaps sneak a kiss with this-uncle's son. Or perhaps, touch this-uncle's daughter's neck, to see if it's true, her neck's her sweet spot. They all do the bad things with each other. They're all Bengali and Muslim. They're staying within cultural boundaries. She feels the excitement all around her. The talk. The glittering colors. The clink of dangling earrings and heavy bangles. The buzz of speakers, Hindi music swimming out from the speakers. It scares her. She can get in trouble here. If anyone finds out about David. Within an hour, word will spread. She'll be labeled the whore in red. The bravado to do something like that to her parents. To drop herself so low. She'll be tainted material. No good. The desi community will blacklist her within minutes. David's an outsider. He's an *American*. With his blond curls and his open dating. Undoubtedly, they'll know. She's not a virgin.

Hema plays with her achal, allowing the sweat from her palm to dry onto the sari. She sees her reflection in the mirror lining one wall of the hall. She's next to Amal. Chitra sits to his right. Hema looks around the hall. The ceremony's over. That was private: close family members only. Now, everyone's here. They're all decked and dressed like peacocks. She looks for David. He shouldn't be hard to spot with his blond curls. She doesn't see him. She looks for Rafi Uncle. She doesn't see him, either. She

takes her phone out of her clutch. Leaves it lying next to her fork. She checks it. No new texts. Perhaps they didn't come. Perhaps they're stuck in traffic. No, he'd text her if that were the case. If he weren't coming. No, perhaps they had an accident. Perhaps David's lying in some hospital because a drunk driver smashed his truck into the side of David's Jaguar. Hema swallows, trying to push that emotional heaviness down her throat and into her stomach. That way, at least, she'll feel too full to eat and she won't get fat. Hema continues to scan the hall. It's so large. Harun Uncle's invited everyone Bengali within the tri-state region. She looks in the mirror again. Her hair's still perfect. She takes out a compact mirror from her clutch. Her makeup's still nice. The lipstick hasn't dried out on her lips. At least she looks good. David and Rafi Uncle should be here by now.

Hema looks at Chitra. Her chin's in her hand. She's looking out at the people, as well. Hema feels empathy. Her mother's like her, sitting at the reception, by herself, just watching everyone else.

Hema feels a tap on her shoulder. She turns. "Rafi Uncle!" her heart's palpitating so fast. She feels as if she's going to faint. She can't breathe properly.

"Well, your voice's as high as ever," he chuckles. "My, you've grown up to be beautiful."

She looks for David's curls behind him. But he blocks her view.

Rafi Uncle pats Amal's shoulder. He turns around. He grins. Stands up. Hugs Rafi Uncle. "It has been too long!"

Rafi Uncle laughs.

Chitra stands up. "Ah, bhai-saab, it is good to see you after so long. How is your health?"

Rafi Uncle smiles. "As polite as ever, I see, bhabi. I'm fine." He points to his stomach, "Though, I have been gaining some weight."

"What can you do? With our age—" Chitra says.

"Oh please," Rafi Uncle cuts in. "You look the same as always."

"Where is your son, Rafi?" Amal asks.

Hema releases her breath. Her father's asked what she's been wondering this entire time.

Rafi Uncle turns around. Looks. "Where...he was right here...with me..."

David walks up to him. "Sorry. I was..." He smiles at Amal and Chitra. "Uncle, Auntie, how are you?"

Amal grins. "My God...David...you look like...a man." He laughs. "My God."

Chitra smiles politely. "Yes, you have grown." Her lips look so tight.

David looks around Chitra and Amal standing there. He smiles at Hema.

“Hema...nice to see you again.”

She stands up now. “Yeah...good to see you, *again*.”

Amal cuts in you. “Oh, yes! I had forgotten. You and Hema have run into each other in the City, yes? Hema told us.” Amal's excited. The way Chitra's pinched her mouth, Hema can tell she isn't pleased with him just now.

David nods his head. “Yeah...we seem to be in the same places...often.” David smiles at her. *In...oh...he thinks he's smart.* Hema hides a smirk behind her hand.

Chitra raises an eyebrow. “Often?”

Rafi Uncle laughs. “We may not see each other often, but apparently our children continue the tradition. He sits down next to Hema's chair. “Sit down. Let's talk. Goodness, suddenly you look like a woman.”

David sits across from her at the table. He's next to Chitra and another couple (family friends as well; they didn't bring their children along). He texts her: *There are some real cute girls here. You think they'd go for me? I'm half.*

She texts back: *You don't have an ounce of Islam in you. So...NO.*

His response: *These girls don't care about religion. I've seen a few at clubs before...they drink.*

Hema's reply: *Doesn't matter. Their husbands need to be Muslim. Think about it...social image. DUH.*

Hema watches David as he ogles random girls. Tall, fair-skinned girl with long, brown hair. They all wear the bright, sequined saris and decadent jewelry. The intricate three-colored eye shadows. The clinging, clanging bangles. They wear that...that...*Bengaliness* she doesn't overtly possess. She's not a Bollywood dance girl. She's not straight out of a Hindi blockbuster.

And she doesn't look it, either.

They walk, noses in the air, making sure to catch a glimpse of Hema as they walk past her. She isn't competition for them. They all wear their traditional clothes at home. They bow their heads in modesty when guests come for dinner. They all live with their parents. They...Hema's at a loss as she watches David, who, at times, leans over the table to loudly whisper to Rafi Uncle that some girl or another's gorgeous or that he's seen her at the mall before or that she'd be a good model to photograph. She grits her teeth cautiously not wanting Chitra to notice.

Hema's not the jealous type.

David's a jerk.

Chitra leans over Amal and touches Hema's forearm. "Hema."

"What?"

"You see that boy," Chitra nods her head in a specific direction.

"Which one?"

"The one with the glasses."

"Yeah..."

"He's an engineer. His mother likes you."

"And?"

"What do you think?"

Chitra sounds so crass. "Ma...can't you be quiet? Why don't you announce to the entire hall this information?" Hema snaps, her whisper harsh when coming up her throat and hitting against her tongue and cheeks.

Chitra nods her head from side to side, as if disappointed. "I spoke to his mother earlier. She asked me about you."

Hema doesn't look at Chitra. "I don't care."

Amal says nothing.

Rafi Uncle leans over both Hema and Amal. "Bhabi, leave the poor girl alone. She's too young for this. And besides, don't you know? She belongs in my house." When he sees Chitra's expression, he laughs. Loud. "I think she'd be perfect as *my* little daughter-in-law."

"You haven't changed one bit, bhai-saab." Hema can tell Chitra's straining to remain polite. But perhaps the strain will be too much on her...

Text on Hema's phone: *Meet me near the bathrooms.*

Hema debates whether she should meet David or not. The bathrooms *are* secluded. Through a separate corridor and through an isolated space. It's likely that no one would find them there. And people *are* eating. Not likely any one would go there just now.

But David deserves to be ignored.

He's been an asshole this entire time.

"I'll be right back," she says to Amal, grabbing her clutch off the table.

"Where are you going? We've just been served dinner." he says, water glass in hand.

"Bathroom."

"Oh." Amal doesn't seem to be suspicious. Good. She looks at Chitra. She's busy in conversation with the wife from the other couple. Rafi Uncle: he's watching for the food platters. She slips away.

David's waiting in between the men and women's bathroom entrances. She walks up to him, her heels clicks the only sound heard.

"Good timing, huh?" he asks. "I knew everyone would be busy eating."

"Shut up." She doesn't feel like looking at him right now.

“What?” He tries to get her to look at him. “What?” He smirks. “Oh... I *know*, you're jealous.” He laughs. “*Baby*, don't worry. That's all a joke. Don't get so heated up about it. I'm just trying to put on an act...you know...for the parents. Besides, they *are* nice girls...”

“Shut up.” She's looking in a mirror. Pushing stray hairs down. “I'm sure they're not as nice as they look. I'm sure they do bad stuff, too. They can't be as perfect as they look. Otherwise, they wouldn't strut like that. You've got to be able to build a certain confidence to walk like that. And that kind of confidence's sexy confidence. And to feel sexy you have to...you have to...you know...know you're sexy....and you know...nice girls don't know what sexy is. They're not supposed to. So they aren't all that nice...you know. I mean, I'm probably not the only girl in that room that...you know...”

He stands behind her in the mirror, looking at her reflection. “You're crazy, you know?”

“Someone might see.” She shrugs him off. “Bleck.” Quietly, she adds, “Am not.”

“Oh come on.” He tries again. She brushes him off. He smirks. “You know everything's a sham, right? All of it. Hell, Dad told me on the way over here, this one's one of the love marriages of the century. The daughter gave Uncle Harun an ultimatum: she either marries this guy, or she moves out...Hell, Hema, look out at the sea of girls. They all have their dirty secrets. You *know* they do.”

She turns around to face him. Blank face.

“Are you serious?” David throws his hands up in the air. “You *cannot* be this naïve. Please. Tell me you are *not* that...*blind*.”

Hema tucks in a stray comma of hair into a bobby pin.

He laughs. It feels too loud for the empty little space. He tilts his head back. Spins around. Releasing some sort of emotion into the air. "Lord, Hema! Think about it...you think you're the *only* bad, little Bengali girl? You think you're the only one who sins?" He laughs again. Hugs her. Mumbles something into her hair.

She wants so badly to know what it is that he's just said. She pushes away from him. Smiles. "We can't be talking about this here." She twirls in front of him. "How do I look?"

He says nothing for a moment. "The hair's sort of vintage, but the intricacy in the back makes it edgy enough. The red's eye catching, the color suits you. And the makeup...well...it's dramatic, harkening back to Indian mod trends..." he scrutinizes her appearance. Makes a face, scrunching his lips together, ugly. Then smiles. "Gorgeous."

She feels as if her little heart would sing if it had lips. "You never say that."

"Shut up."

"You don't!" She does a little dance in front of him.

He laughs. "Your happy dance?"

She stops. Very somber. "Don't make fun!"

Hema goes back to the table before David does. He returns four minutes, twenty-three seconds after her. She smiles at him. Chitra hisses at Hema to be appropriate. "Act

your age, Hema! Don't be shameless." Apparently to smile at a family friend's son is to display hussy-like tendencies.

A certain adrenaline pumps through Hema's veins as she and David share secret smiles and expressions, the tri-state's Bengali population in their presence. And no one knows what the two of them are up to. They're a couple. All the mothers know their daughters aren't virgins. All the fathers know their sons like the occasional glass of whisky. She allows the mothers look to at her as a prospective wife for their bachelor sons. Single girls gawk at him and his strong jaw.

Hema sighs. Everyone's a little bit not-good.

The idea of being caught sharing a glance: it feels funny to Hema. She texts David. He texts back. And where Chitra would expect Hema to complain from boredom, Hema seems to smile with a secret behind her lips.

(NOT) THE END...